

A Friend In Need - Rewritten

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Summary: Misery loves company, and nowhere has only one misfit. It's a lot easier to be an outcast when there's someone with you. What would it have been like, if Hiccup had a friend before Toothless? A friend who was as much the odd one out as he was?

1. Chapter 1

Summary: Misery loves company, and nowhere has only one misfit. It's a lot easier to be an outcast when there's someone with you. What would it have been like, if Hiccup had a friend before Toothless?

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<p>Chapter One

It is never nice to be the misfit, the useless one, the unwanted outsider, but it is much easier when you have company.

No one would ever say it when there was a chance of Enna Oakenhawk overhearing them and reaching for her spear, but only the fact that her daughter was easily overlooked, and could lift a sword without staggering, saved her from being the worst Viking on Berk, if not the entire Barbaric Archipelago.

Part of it was that she preferred to talk her way out of problems, rather than reach for a weapon or break things. Mentioned slightly less "certainly less in public" was the fact that Natalya Oakenhawk was not, strictly speaking, a Viking of Berk.

Trader Johan may have been a welcome visitor, bringing news and needed items, but his bastard offspring by Enna was not so much. He loved Enna, and their child, but his life and livelihood was on the

sea, in Trade, and Enna's family had opposed the match, even after no other family would accept Enna as a wife for their sons.

As far as most of Berk was concerned, the one blessing in Natalya's existence was that it gave Trader Johan a reason to visit Berk more often than he otherwise would " and that Natalya hadn't inherited her father's chatty nature.

Her father's curiosity and level head in a crisis, her mother's determination and bold tongue " at least when she chose to use it " on the other hand, Natalya had managed to inherit in spades. Vikings appreciated bluntness, but since the child's opinions tended to be very un-Viking in nature, her bluntness was another thing that was not so appreciated.

The other Viking children appreciated it even less, and Natalya was nearly five before she made her first friend, Hiccup, Chief Stoick's son and great disappointment. Eager to please, witty, sarcastic and clever beyond comprehension or approval, Hiccup's total inability to stay under the radar and skill at inventing things meant that his mistakes tended to draw far more attention.

Being the Heir to the Tribe, and thus having all eyes on him anyway, might also have something to do with that, while Natalya was frequently overshadowed by her cousin, Astrid.

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><p>Enna was by no means weak, but never did not care about prowess or physical strength, striking down all and any it chose.<p>

All but orphaned at the age of seven, the same year that the search for Valhalla was finally called off and a grieving Stoick apprenticed his son to Gobber, Natalya was more alone than ever.

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><p>Even years later, Natalya would never be able to truly say what it was that drew her to the dragons.<p>

Perhaps it was the childlike wonder of the unknown, because for all the statistics and killing techniques, what did Vikings really _know_ about dragons?

Perhaps it was her father's sense of adventure, the love of doing things that no-one else would dare or dream of.

Or perhaps it was just a feeling that there had to be something more than the constant fighting and killing between the two species. Natalya might not be a proper Viking, but at least she could help.

Getting the Book of Dragons away from Fishlegs was not easy, but she managed. She also decided that it would be best to make her own copy, rather than having to tackle the huge book, bounce off and grab the book while he was too surprised to react every time she wanted to read it.

Stopping at the forge to talk to Hiccup was part of her daily routine, as was being chased away by Gobber when Hiccup got too

excited talking about his latest idea and knocked something over. As it was, Hiccup was willing to let her borrow one of his journals when she promised to replace it the next time her father visited, and Natalya would have stayed longer, but she spotted Fishlegs looking for her.

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><p>The rock formations off of the South Coast of Berk were easy to reach at Low Tide, if you didn't mind a bit of climbing, and were an excellent place to be alone. Since there was nothing to smash and not enough room to train, the only Vikings who went there were the young show-offs who used the formations as an obstacle course for boat races, and people seeking solitude.<p>

It was also a good fishing spot, but not good enough for those whose livelihood depended on the fish they caught and thus frequented only occasionally by those looking to earn a little on the side. Aware that she wouldn't be able to rely on her mother's family forever, Natalya had taken to staking out one of two small nets at low tide and swapping them the next day. She changed the nets, tying up the full one and placing it in the little coracle that had been a birthday gift from her father (though Natalya had enjoyed his tale of how he had obtained it from the wild Celts more than the gift itself) and making sure the replacement was securely tied.

Sitting down on a flat rock, Natalya opened the Dragon Manual in front of her, balanced the journal on her lap, and started to copy.

_Common-or-Garden: As the name suggests, this is the most common breed of dragon. Coloured Green, Yellow or Brown, they are armed with basic teeth and claws, and prickly spines. While bearing a strong similarity to the Terrible Terror, which are characterised by larger heads, the speed of the Common-or-Garden dragon is most noticeable when this dragon is in retreat.
>

Well, that explained why those dragons only hung around in raids long enough to grab a few fish and get the Hel out of there._

>

Gronckles: the plug-ugly of the dragon species. Gronckles are very thick-skinned, with strong jaws and hard skull for ramming its enemies. Lazy, to the point of often falling asleep in mid-flightâ€¦|

By the time Natalya had finished most of the book and all of the ink her father had brought on his last trip, Low Tide had started to become High Tide, and she settled in to wait.

Technically, Natalya was part of the Hofferson Clan, her mother's sister being married to the Head of that family and Natalya's only living kin, but she stayed in the Oakenhawk Hall, now largely empty after the death of her mother and grandparents, often enough that no-one would worry if she wasn't home before dinner.

She leaned back and closed her eyes, enjoying the rare sunshine.

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><p>Loud squawking made her eyes snap open again, looking up to see a kind of aerial warfare going on between a flock of seagulls and a smaller flock of Terrible Terrors.<p>

Natalya hastily dropped the stone she had picked up, hoping that they wouldn't notice her. Terrors might not be very large, but a flock could carry off an entire fishing boat. Even the small number in the air would be enough for a single human child. Maybe they would just finish fighting with the seagulls over the fish and leaveâ€|

â€|or not.

Both Seagulls and Terrors froze in place when one spotted her and shrieked a warning, and Natalya took the opportunity to scramble down the rock much faster than was probably safe. She reached the coracle, the tide high enough for her to paddle safelyâ€| only for the Terrors to descend on the little boat, Natalya's screaming lost in the beating of wings.

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><p>Berk had a hidden valley, uncharted thanks to being surrounded by a trench and sheer cliffs that made it accessable only by birds.<p>

Or by dragons.

The Terrors definitely had a way to go as far as gentle landings were concerned, but coracles were sturdy things. Funnily enough, as soon as they had dropped the boat, the little dragons scattered over the valley.

Puzzled by the behaviour, Natalya extracted herself from the net and stood up, looking around. The valley was beautiful, filled with lush grass and a small lake, scattered with clumps of trees and rocksâ€| from which small groups of baby dragons were emerging.

Natalya froze in petrified fear again as they crowded around her like chicks begging for food, spotting Nadders, Nightmares and everything in between. Praying that they weren't hungry for Viking, Natalya groped behind her and held out a fish. A baby Nadder all but sat up and begged.

Natalya tossed the fish to the baby Nadder, only to find all of the other dragons eyeing her with similar pleading expressions. Mentally sighing, she hauled out the entire net and emptied it on the grass, nearly getting knocked back into the coracle by the stampede of dragons. It was chaos for a while, but ended with several dragons gazing at her like she hung the moon, most of them tumbling around in a clumsy game of tag, and one purple-grey dragon cuddled up beside her as they basked in the afternoon sun.

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><p>But it couldn't last.<p>

Natalya finally convinced the Terrors to take both her and the coracle back to the rock formations, hiding in the setting sun, and

promised to be back the next day by pointing at the setting sun, and then straight up, indicating noon. Not wanting to be caught outside in the dark, she paddled back to Berk just in time to meet Hiccup as he all but staggered out of the Smithy, brightening when he saw her.

If all went well, perhaps she would tell Hiccup in a week or two.

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><p>AN: So, this is the first chapter of the re-written A Friend In Need. I have decided to leave the previous version up, just in case anyone likes that better, and post this as a separate story, as I will be making enough changes for it not to count as a double-post._

Comments and constructive criticism are most welcome.

2. Chapter 2

Disclaimer: I don't own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

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><p>CHAPTER TWO**

Natalya woke up in her mother's old bed the next day, feeling unusually warm. Reluctantly, still half-asleep, she slowly opened her eyesâ€| and was jolted to full awareness when she discovered that one of yesterday's new friends had followed her home.

That explained the warmth, at least, even if it caused a whole host of other problems.

Luckily, there was some smoked meat and fish in the cold-room, and Natalya had left a batch of bread dough to rise overnight. That would provide a decent excuse for where she had been, if anyone even asked, and a dragon would get the oven going a lot faster than Natalya could.

She mimed blowing into the oven as she shaped the dough into loaves and was rewarded with a small burst of flame that lit the fire. She stroked the dragon just behind its frill and put the bread on, laying out plans for getting the dragon out of the house un-noticed.

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>Natalya had considered telling Hiccup about the dragons when she learned more and adjusted to the situation herself, but it turned out to be un-necessary.<p><p>

The purple dragon, who Natalya had eventually named Skyfire, hadn't stopped somehow showing up by the time Natalya awoke in the morning, no matter what she tried. More importantly, the dragon was growing fast enough that smuggling her out under the coracle wasn't going to work for much longer, if only because Natalya wasn't strong enough to carry both of them.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a short knock and the door opening unexpectedly. "Gobber gave me the day off so he could fix his hand, and I thought â€" "

Hiccup stopped mid-sentence and stared, making an obvious effort to stay calm. "Natalya, what â€" "

Natalya yanked him inside and shut the door before he could accidentally alert anyone and before a less reasonable Viking noticed the dragon curled up by the fire. "You'll never believe this, but she followed me home."

Hiccup groped for a chair and practically fell into it. "Natalya, that's insane! A Dragon, following you home? How? What breed is it, anyway? What are you - ?"

Natalya giggled. "I know, but she did. Remember when I borrowed your journal to make a copy of the Book of Dragons last month? Well, I ran into some Terrors having a fight with some seagulls, and I was trying to run but they carried off my coracle, with me and the day's catch inside of it."

Hiccup was not-so-discreetly checking her for injuries, and Natalya batted his hands away. "Stop that, I'm fine! Anyway, they took me to where they live, but there were no adult dragons, just babies. I fed them and at the end of the day they took me back."

Hiccup closed his eyes. "I can't believe I'm even saying this, but does it have a name? What breed is it?"

Natalya shrugged. "I was thinking of Skyfire, but that's only a thought. As for the breed, I think she's a mix. She looks mostly like a Skrill, but the lines are softer and more graceful, with a longer neck. Her wings are closest to a Sky Dragon, and she spends a lot of time soaking up the sun, like they do. She's also looking to become a lot bigger than a Skrill, and Sky Dragons are one of the biggest breeds out there. Luckily, they're also one of the gentlest. What?"

Hiccup was grinning fondly. "I haven't seen you so enthusiastic about anything before, that's all. How are you going to explain disappearing all the time, though? If you keep it up, that is."

Natalya shrugged again, shoving away a pang of sorrow. "I'm illegitimate. My father provides only two-thirds of my support, as required by law, and the less I'm around, the happier the Hoffersons are. Astrid does have three brothers, after all. The Hall is mine, as the third of support provided by my mother's family, so if I get

Father's permission, I can live here instead. He talked with the Hoffersons about it on his last trip."

That was practical, though Natalya would still need to find a way of supporting herself. Bastards brought very little to an alliance, so their chances of marriage were never high. Hiccup nodded thoughtfully, his mind racing. "Sensible. But, truthfully, why are you doing this?"

Natalya paused. "Truthfully, I don't know; it just feels right. But think about it. Every baby dragon that I feed is one less that is likely to grow up to raid Berk. Terrors hunt in packs, and if I can teach them to use a net, they won't need to raid our stores. Dragons get old just like we do, and if we can create a generation of non-hostile dragonsâ€¦"

"We can stop the war! Natalya, that's brilliant!" Hiccup tried to swing her around, overbalanced and brought them both crashing to the floor in a tangle of limbs and laughter. "Thanks for telling me. I know it was a risk."

Natalya helped him up and hugged him. "We're best friends, aren't we? Besides, you're the smartest person I know, and I won't be able to do this all by myself."

Hiccup grew serious. "Even if your plan works perfectly, it's going to take a long time. I only just started in the Forge, but I already have plenty of ideas for weapons. If we can capture grown dragons, instead of killing them, we can study them."

Natalya smiled gratefully, not needing words. "You get Sun's Day off, don't you? I'll introduce you then."

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>Natalya wasn't stupid, and knew the dangers of introducing Hiccup to the Dragons.<p><p>

For one thing, he was the son of the chief, and the consequences for him if they were discovered too soon would be much more severe. For another, Hiccup was not a good liar, and loved his father fiercely. Hiccup didn't know the dragons, didn't love them as Natalya did â€" not yet. Friendship or not, if it came to a choice between Stoick and the Village, or Natalya and the dragons, she didn't know where Hiccup would fall.

For now, it was a good thing that they were both so small and could fit easily into the coracle. He screamed a lot less than Natalya had on her first flight, which she found both relieving and annoying. He didn't freeze like Natalya had the first time, either. In fact, she didn't even need to teach him how to approach the dragons!

If Hiccup had been even a little less her friend, Natalya would have been pouting. As it was, she was perhaps a bit too pleased when Hiccup sat down beside her, hands shaking a little. "That might probably be the most terrifying thing I've done in my life."

Natalya smiled. "It's not that bad, and it gets easier, especially when you consider that they're only babies." She paused a moment, "Well? Do you think we can do it?"

Hiccup nudged her. "I think that you can do anything you put your mind to, though I don't know how much help I'll be. Gobber keeps a very close eye on me, and probably the most I'll be able to do is figure out inventions that capture instead of kill."

His friend shrugged. "Well, nothing is going to happen in the short-term, and while I don't wish Stoick any misfortune, a day will come when you'll be Chief, and in a position to make a difference."

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>AN: According to Viking Answer Lady, Sex outside of Marriage was a bit of a tricky subject. Marriages were arranged by families with little regard for the future husband and wife, who were expected to work things out later, but since several sagas record a wife maiming or even killing a husband she really didn't want, presumably she was asked if she had any serious objections. Men could have concubines or bed-slaves, but women were expected to be chaste and faithful. This is where it gets tricky._

If a woman was seduced or raped, no stigma was attached, unlike many other countries of the time. An acknowledged bastard would only receive two-thirds of support from the father's family, unlike a legitimate child who would be fully supported. An unacknowledged bastard would be totally reliant on its mother's family, and the mother would have less chance of making a good marriage. This was another reason Vikings did not have long courtships, as the sagas also record eight cases of an extended courtship resulting in an illegitimate child.

With all the dragon raids, Berk is probably not very prosperous. The Hoffersons already have at least one child (probably more) both parents and likely an extended family to support. Regardless of personal feelings toward a child they don't really understand or relate to, they will not be unhappy if she is no longer their responsibility.

3. Chapter 3

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters or spin-offs.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

_Author's Note: This almost didn't get published. I have Aspergers Syndrome, and part of that is that I often need reassurance on the quality of my work. Even something as simple as "good job, keep it up" absolutely makes my day, while a total lack of reviews makes me question if the story is worth continuing. I have to admit that

several of my stories have gone on very long hiatus for exactly this reason. I don't want to sound like I'm begging for reviews, but it is nice to know that hard work is appreciated._

* * *

><p>Chapter Three**

Natalya was ten when she and Hiccup recieved an awkward surprise.

They had been sitting with the flock, making another net for the dragons to use and going over the lesser-read part of the Book of Dragons, when a flurry of wings made them look up. It was a few adult dragons, and a large number of very young ones, only just able to fly.

Both humans moved closer to the dragons that were already there, not having the weapons or the room to defend themselves if the adult dragons attacked. Luckily, they didn't, but only dropped off the hatchlings, nuzzling them in farewell and looking as close to mournful as a dragon could, before flying off again, not even stopping to raid the village.

Hiccup and Natalya exchanged confused looks, then simultaneously reached for the Book of Dragons. Natalya let Hiccup have it while she took the last of the fish over to the new arrivals and started coaxing the original inhabitants to play nicely.

Hiccup found what they needed just as Natalya walked back, a Baby Nadder practically hanging off her. Hiccup held up the Book of Dragons, moving over so that she could sit down again. "Found it."

Natalya skimmed through the page, swiftly processing the information. "So dragons lay a clutch every three to five years, depending on the edragon, and the eggs take a week to hatch. Hiccup, we are going to have a problem in a few years."

Hiccup nodded. It had not been too difficult to feed the dozen or so dragons that were already here, but doubling that number of mouths to feed was going to be hard. "Well, we were talking about teaching the older and larger ones to hunt for themselves anyway, since we managed to teach the terrors how to fish, so we just need to step up on that. Maybe we can look at some of the islands nobody has settled, the ones that don't have good land for farming, or are too small for a proper community, and maybe move some of the dragons there."

Natalya considered. "I doubt that Skyfire would mind scouting them out too much. Now the only problem is how we can teach them to hunt."

Hiccup shrugged. "Most of the adults are leaving on another search in three weeks, after the harvest is in and Trader Johan visits. That will leave just the mothers with young children and the ones whose work keeps them here."

Natalya tilted her head, doing a few calculations. "If we try to teach them a few hunting moves now, and maybe some hand signals, they should be ready in three weeks, and we can start teaching them to get

food without raiding."

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><p>A large part of the early training fell to Hiccup, as Trader Johan would most likely want to spend what spare time he had with his daughter, and Natalya was planning to talk him into giving permission for something. Luckily, dragons were natural predators, and Natalya had already come up with a number of words and phrases which she had started to teach the older fledglings.<p>

The first attempted hunting trip, mainly to see what the dragons knew by instinct, was one big mess. Their first time hunting, dragons collided with each other as they tried to go for the same prey, flew in the wrong direction or went into something very much like a tantrum when they missed a catch.

On the ground and trying not to laugh as Natalya directed operation in the air (or at least tried to) Hiccup took notes and started sketching ideas for a saddle that would help direct a dragon so that he could teach them to associate commands with maneuvers.

Finally, he glanced out to the sea from his rocky perch, spotting a familiar ship. He waved Natalya down from where she was directing the dragons back to the valley. "Your father's coming in! I'll finish up here, if you want to take Skyfire back!"

Even from a distance, it was easy to see her blinding smile as she gave the last group of dragons the signal for 'land', and Hiccup felt a pang in his chest that he tried to ignore. Natalya was a bastard, but her father was proud to acknowledge her, making sure she knew she was loved even in his absence, without having to prove anything. Hiccup was the son of the chief, but his father was always after him to be the best and only ever looked at him with disappointment.

Hiccup didn't begrudge his friend one of the few advantages she had in life, nor was he blind to the privileges he did have from his birth (privacy was certainly a blessing) but there were times that he did envy her.

* * *

><p>Natalya left Skyfire in the woods behind her mother's hall, darted inside long enough to grab the waybread and preserves she had made, both as a gift and a persuasive argument, and ran the rest of the way to the docks. She arrived just as her father was lowering the plank, darting through the crowd of Vikings and practically throwing herself into his arms. "Father!"<p>

Trader Johan hugged her tightly, wishing again that his skill set would have allowed him to settle on Berk and marry Enna, raising their child properly. Sleeping together had been Enna's last ditch attempt to get her parent's permission, but the Oakenhawks had preferred an acknowledged bastard to letting their younger child marry an outsider who would be gone most of the year and had no useful ability outside of trading and storytelling.

Enna probably would have gone with him on his journeys, her parents' wishes be damned, but she suffered from terrible seasickness, and a

small ship that frequently sailed into dangerous waters and even more dangerous situations was no place to raise a baby. A stable life on Berk was better than the uncertainty of his own, and he always made sure to let Natalya (and all of Berk) know that he was not ashamed of her.

Releasing his daughter, he held her at arms length. "You've grown so tall, child. You look more like your mother every day."

Natalya lit up like the Northern Lights. "Did you bring back any stories to tell? I made preserves and waybread, and Hiccup says that they're good."

Johan had seen the bond between his daughter and the Chief's son, and had no doubt that Hiccup would have praised Natalya's cooking to the skies if it had been burned black. Natalya was shaping up as an excellent cook, however, and some of the Meatheads had almost broke into a fight over the last jar of her berry preserves.

Instead of saying as such, he smiled, picking up a small bag. "I brought far more than stories. Do you have any adventures to tell me about?"

Natalya looked inside the bag and nearly bounced with glee. "Ooh, spices! Hiccup has been inventing again, and some of his ideas are really good, even if the other Vikings don't think so. Come to Mother's hall for dinner and I'll try something from the recipe book you brought me last time. There's something else I wanted to talk to you about, but it can wait."

Natalya wove her way back through the crowd, stopping halfway up the hill to talk with another small figure, letting Johan get on with his usual trading.

Spices were worth a king's ransom in some parts of the world, but seeing his daughter smile and giving her an advantage in life with the ability to make food that no-one else could was more than worth it.

* * *

><p>Natalya and Hiccup were sitting at the table, enticing smells drifting through the kitchen, when Trader Johan walked in at the end of the day. From the books in front of them, he assumed that they were discussing some of Hiccup's plans for future inventions, especially since the books were slammed shut before he could properly see them. But that was understandable; sharing trade secrets was bad for business.<p>

Hiccup stood and collected the books. "I'd better get home. Good luck."

Natalya hugged him, as she always did. "I'll see you tomorrow. Let me know how it goes."

The chief's son left, and Natalya darted into the kitchen, returning with a platter of food which she set on the table between them. Johan broke open a soft loaf of bread, relishing the smell and taste after so many weeks of hard bread and sea rations. "If you chose, you could have a promising career as a baker. This is excellent."

Natalya beamed, as she always did when anyone paid her a compliment, though I according to the Hoffersons that didn't happen very often when Johan wasn't around. "Actually, that was one of the things I wanted to talk to you about..."

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><p>AN: So, a bit of fluff, a bit of story, and I hope you all liked it. On the downside, I have three assignments due in two weeks and no free weekends. On the bright side, my TAFE course is nearly over, after which I will probably have a lot more writing time._

Constructive Criticism is much appreciated.

Thanks,

Nat

4. Chapter 4

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Summary: See Previous Chapters.

****Chapter Four****

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><p>The second hunt went much better than the first. Wild boars were nearly as much of a pest to the other inhabitants of Berk as the Dragons were. Using them as a second food source for the dragons was actually helpful to the island, as well as to Natalya herself, as a single haunch was enough for several pies and two batches of stuffed rolls.<p>

Trader Johan had been receptive enough to the idea of Natalya opening a shop. He had his reservations due to her age, but she was only a few years from being a woman, and correct that it wasn't fair to have to rely on the Hoffersons forever. It was unconventional, certainly, but there were few options available to a female bastard, and Johan would rather see her able to support herself than become a concubine or bed warmer.

It actually wasn't that hard, though it required some re-arranging of her time with the dragons. Adding a smaller building next to her hall wasn't hard, after bribing a few workers with a week of free bread, and it was easy to claim that she spent the middle of the day in the

woods trapping or gathering ingredients.

Leaving a slow-rising dough that she had found in a book from her father to rise overnight saved on ingredients, and several of the recipes from other lands gained her a boost in popularity. It also allowed her to keep her prices slightly lower than those in the Mead Hall, and to specialise in small things that could be eaten on the go if you didn't have time to go to the Mead Hall. Stuffed rolls were one of those things, essentially dough wrapped around finely chopped meat, vegetables or other filling of choice before being baked and eaten hot.

The fact that they were quick and easy to make was another blessing, especially after a dragon raid. The Oakenhawks had possessed the sense to eventually rebuild the living area and store-rooms out of stone, rather than wood. Combined with the fact that a Skrill was surpassed only by a Night Fury for staying hidden in the dark, and few dragons wanted to tangle with that level of teeth and claws when there were easier targets, meant that there were a number of times when Natalya and the Mead Hall were the only buildings with a functioning kitchen.

Or the only buildings standing, but the point remained.

It also helped that Skyfire had developed a gift for cameoflage, which confirmed Natalya's opinion that she was part Sky Dragon. Sky Dragons were regularly mistaken as large clouds, and while Skyfire's colouring prevented being mistaken for a fluffy white cloud like her relatives, she made a very convincing thunder cloud, especially in lower light or a storm. Of course, a Skrill's ability to ride lightning and unique brand of fire-breathing only helped this impression.

Skyfire was also a lot smaller than Sky Dragons, finishing her growth only slightly larger than a Nightmare. On the positive side, at least this meant that Skyfire could get a lot closer before people realised that she wasn't a cloud.

* * *

><p>Winter meant that Natalya was, at 14 to Hiccup's 12 years of age, bundled up in a thick, fur-lined wool coat and sewing herself a new wool dress and apron, curled up as close to Skyfire as she could manage. She would be glad when this growing spurt was over and she could stop making a new underdress every few months when she outgrew the old one. She was already sewing the apron as long as practical and with far more seam allowance than usual.<p>

Not far away from her, Hiccup was practically invisible under a pile of Terrors, using their body heat to warm himself up as he sketched and wrote in his journal. "You know, It's times like this that I really envy Fishlegs and Snotlout."

Natalya took a moment to decipher the muffled voice and figure out what he meant, as the two boys didn't exactly have a lot in common, and laughed. "Fishlegs I understand; he's large enough to keep warm, but I don't know about Snotlout."

Hiccup managed to poke his head out of the pile, a Terror balanced on his head. "Why not? He's big enough."

Natalya laughed again at the picture he made, trying not to notice how cute it made the Chief's son look. She had been doing that a lot lately. "He was in the shop with the Thorston twins yesterday, arguing with Tuffnut about who was tougher and insisting that 'Real Men' didn't need blankets, even in winter. Ruffnut egging them on didn't help."

Hiccup grinned back. "Sounds like the Twins. Maybe Snotlout will stop trying to impress Astrid and make an idiot of himself over Ruffnut, instead."

Natalya laughed at the mental image of Snotlout attempting to court the violent girl, who had once tried to bury him alive, though their shared love of destruction might actually make her give him a chance. Hiccup was not quite as easily deterred, though. "But don't try to distract me, Natalya, something is bothering you."

Hiccup was far more perceptive than most Vikings, which could be a blessing or a curse. It was nice to know that he paid such close attention to her mood. "A few things, really. The Hoffersons were talking about taking me to the Thing this year, and I can't help but worry why. Astrid wasn't happy about having to stay behind, but my Father agreed with - what are you looking like that for?"

Hiccup tried to wipe the dreamy look of his face. "Nothing! Just - Astrid's kind of cute, don't you think? I mean, I know that she probably wants to be a Shieldmaiden, but still... What's wrong?"

Natalya wore the shuttered expression that said to anyone who knew her that she was unhappy about something, but trying not to show it. Of course Hiccup would go for Astrid, who was blonde and blue-eyed, better with an axe than some adults, beautiful, the perfect Viking teenager... and legitimate.

Who would ever pick Natalya over that, especially if they had to marry well, as Hiccup would? She tried to brush it off, along with the sudden urge to yank her cousin's lovely blonde hair out by the roots. "Hiccup, I'm a girl, too. We don't give opinions on the physical desirability of other girls. Not as a compliment, at least."

Hiccup was bright enough to change the topic. "So, I was thinking that we need to be a bit more proactive. We don't know how long dragons live, and even the oldest of our dragons is still a few years from adulthood. But, after seeing that they aren't mindless beasts, I was trying to figure out a way to capture dragons, rather than killing them."

Natalya smiled, completing the thought. "And if we study them and show the others our findings, they might come around to our way of thinking! Well, some of the younger ones, anyway, I don't know about the adults."

Hiccup shook off the pile of Terrors, sitting next to Natalya and pulling out his sketchbook as Skyfire shifted to curl around them both. He flipped through several drawings of dragon saddles, various inventions and even a few of Natalya herself, before stopping on something that looked like a mix of a miniature covered wagon like

her father had described some nomadic tribes as using, a trebuchet (another thing that she only knew from her father's descriptions) and a crossbow. Next to it was the drawing of a net, with bolas attached, linked by the net, rather than a chain.

Natalya was impressed but confused. "Hiccup, you know when I said that not everyone was as clever as you?"

Hiccup looked slightly sheepish. "Oh, right. Well, you take it to where the defences are set up, aim, and then it launches the net when you pull a lever, instead of having to actually throw it. Gives it a faster and longer range, too. And you can move it to aim a lot better than judging when to release."

Natalya smiled, freeing one arm to gesture at him. "You see? This is why we are going to succeed one day."

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><p>Natalya's trip to the annual Thing didn't go as badly as she had feared, and became a regular trip.<p>

As she was not required to attend any of the meetings, judgements or other official things, she spent most of the time at her father's Stall, having bribed the Bog-Burglars with preserves and a week's supply of stuffed rolls to leave their possessions alone. With Skyfire refusing to stray far from Natalya's side, it wasn't hard to fly back to the Valley so that the babies didn't think that she and Hiccup had abandoned them.

That was another area where the Bog-Burglars were useful. The Heir might be the biggest chatterbox this side of Valhalla, but Loki himself couldn't pry a secret out of her, if she was minded to keep it, and covering for Hiccup and Natalya when they were at the Valley appealed to her sense of mischief. Speaking of whomâ€| "Camicazi, I swear by Thorâ€|"

Two irate male voices echoed across the beach, followed swiftly by the laughter of a girl with blonde hair that even the most generous of critics would struggle to describe as 'wild'. That was another reason to like the Thing; Hiccup's fellow Heirs.

Camicazi of the Bog-Burglars was a year younger than Hiccup, and Thuggory of the Meat-Heads a little more than a year older, but both of them appreciated Hiccup's mind and treated him almost like a brother. A brother who they only saw once a year, perhaps, and who was the brains to Thuggory's brawn and Cami's audacity, but Natalya considered it a good thing that Hiccup would not be alone if the Hoffersons did succeed in marrying her off to someone.

There did seem to be a few more young men hanging around the stall this year than last, though that could be the food. Apparently, her father hadn't been exaggerating (for once) when he claimed that a fight had nearly broken out over the last jar of her preserves.

Viking women who chose the sword generally were not known for their domestic skills â€" Trader Johan often pointed out that he certainly hadn't fallen in love with Enna for her cooking â€" and girls who chose a more traditional path didn't usually come to the Thing,

unless they were an Heir or needed as a witness for something.

Camicazi skidded to a halt in a spray of sand, making Natalya hastily cover the bowl, and took refuge behind the older girl. Hiccup and Thuggory tried to stop before they ran into Natalya, crashed into each other, and rolled to a halt in a tangle of limbs at her feet. "Ow."

Camicazi burst out laughing as Natalya rolled her eyes. "Very impressive, both of you. What did Cami do this time?"

The Bog-Burglar Heir adopted an innocent expression that fooled no-one. "What makes you think it was me? Boys aren't nearly as good as girls, so it's even more likely that it was one of their fault."

That made Natalya even more certain that Cami was the instigator. "Because Hiccup tries to avoid stirring up trouble, and Thuggory prefers to let either you or Hiccup do the thinking? Just tell me if this is something I'll want to claim ignorance about."

The look exchanged between the three Heirs spoke louder than any words could. "Fine, I never saw you, and you can hide in the tent for a few hours."

If Camicazi could cover for her and Hiccup about the Dragons, then Natalya could do the same, especially if it make Hiccup smile like that.

She heard Thuggory muttering as all three Heirs tried to get through the tent opening at the same time. "How can you like this Astrid girl so much, if she's even a little like Cami? I mean, Cami makes an awesome little sister, but I'd never ask her out. Far too scary. Ow!"

Cami had probably just hit him. Hiccup's reply was inaudible, but Natalya felt her good mood evaporate.

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><p>AN: well, I'm halfway through my work placement, and once that's over I should have more writing time. I wanted to get one last chapter up before I see the pre-release of HTTYD 2 with friends. I love being friends who are willing to geek out with me and dress up as Vikings for a night at the movies!_

Also, Poll Time! What pairings would you like to see, or should this remain strictly a friendship fic, aside from the Canon crush on Astrid? Submit your opinion in a review.

Thanks,

Nat

5. Chapter 5

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters or spin-offs.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FIVE

17-year-old Natalya was seething and taking her frustration out on a batch of dough.

Yes, last night had been a bit of a fiasco, especially when Hiccup claimed to have hit a Nightfury, but _what_ did Gobber think he was _doing_, telling her that she would be taking part in Dragon Training, starting tomorrow?

Well, thank you very much for the advance warning so that she could work out a way together her cooking done and rearrange the rest of her day! It wasn't like she depended on a trade to make her living, or that those learning or practicing a trade was usually exempt from training as a warrior...

Her thoughts were cut off as the door opened and Hiccup flew in, looking panicked. "My dad signed me up for dragon training! What are we going to do? We need a plan, fast!"

He slumped into a chair as Natalya fixed him with a raised eyebrow. She sighed, "To be fair, it's not like either of us expected anything like this to ever happen. If you won't be at the forge, we can go early mornings and afternoons, instead of half-days, and I'll just have to stay up later and get my orders delivered early."

Hiccup matched her sigh with his own as he dropped his head, narrowly missing a face-plant into the dough. "At least the dragons know enough to hunt for themselves, if they need to. That's not all, though. I found the Nightfury I hit."

Nightfuries were one of the few dragons they hadn't encountered among the baby dragons, and one that anyone with functioning brain cells could tell you that there was a big difference any newly-born or hand raised animal and a wild-caught adult. This was especially true of dragons, as the adults that they would face in training had almost certainly taken part in a raid and saw humans as enemies to kill or be killed by.

Hiccup correctly interpreted her worried look. "I'm fine, Natalya, really. He was trapped in the bola net, and I was still scared when he opened his eye, but he looked as frightened as I was. It was like looking into a mirror. I cut him loose, and all he did was roar at me and take off."

Natalya blinked. That was... unexpected, to say the least. She blinked again when Hiccup abruptly changed the subject, "How is your

poleaxe working out?"

The poleaxe in question was an axe head on a pole nearly as tall as she was. After the tenth time she narrowly avoided chopping her own foot off when she dropped it due to the weight, Natalya had taken it to Hiccup for modifications. Hiccup had turned the shaft into wood with a metal core, using the leftovers to put a spike on the bottom end and make her a few charms to decorate her dress. Natalya smiled at him, "Much better, now that I can actually lift it. At least I'll have a weapon I can use, and few people will be surprised if I fail to actually injure a dragon with it."

Hiccup snickered. "Maybe. After the way you threatened Dogsbreath away from trying to steal your cooking at the last Thing, though, maybe not."

The weapon had been another of her father's gifts after the previous Thing, when Trader Johan somehow got the idea that boys had started noticing his only daughter.

His original gift had been a bow and arrows to help her in hunting rabbits and such, which she had loved and started planning how to use on dragonback. Then Natalya had turned around to see her father glaring at Thuggory, who had been leaning on the counter in a manner far too much like Snotlout when he was trying to be 'charming' for Natalya to take the Heir seriously, and stalking off to trade with a weapons merchant.

Two days later, he had given her the poleaxe, and Natalya had spent a week limping from where she had promptly dropped ten pounds of solid metal on her foot as soon as her father turned his back.

Natalya rolled her eyes playfully. "As far as most people are concerned, that was pure luck. I guess our plan is to try and use everyone's low expectations to avoid killing dragons, and hope that the dragons in the arena are ones that dropped their young into our care."

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><p>They lingered with the dragons for as long as they could the next morning, both silent as they attempted to think of an upside to the whole mess. It wasn't until they were trudging back to the village that Hiccup brightened a little. "Hey, since we're training together, that means Astrid will at least have to talk to me, right?"<p>

His Crush's cousin only scowled and sped up a little, muttering something too quietly for even his sharp ears to catch. Of course, he couldn't expect her to be as excited as he was to be spending time with Astrid, and with the way she was gripping her poleaxe, it was probably better for Hiccup not to ask.

Natalya reached the arena first, at the same time as the other teen recruits. Gobber threw open the grate, sounding far too cheerful. Then again, so did most of the other teens, and the Twins were the worst. "I'm hoping for some serious burns."

"I'm hoping for some mauling, like on my lower back."

"Yeah, it's only fun if you get a scar out of it."

"I hate you all so much right now."

Astrid was getting better at sarcasm, and Natalya was hoping for the strength of will to prevent herself from trying to thump the twins for their excitement, and was only stopped by the fact that she probably couldn't do so without getting beaten up. She jerked out of her planning when she heard Hiccup trudging in, somehow sounding even less enthusiastic than she was. "No kidding. Pain? Love it."

Tuffnut sighed. "Oh, great. Who let him in?"

Gobber spoke over all of them, pretending not to have heard the male twin. "Alright, let's get started. The recruit who does best will win the honour of killing his very first dragon."

Natalya mentally cursed, planning to do the worst that she could. Training to defend yourself from dragons was a sensible idea, yes, but no-one had said anything about killing! Being hopeless enough to be thrown out of Dragon Training sounded like a pretty good idea right nowâ€¦

Snotlout sneered. "Well, Hiccup already killed a Night Fury, so does that disqualify him?"

Natalya rolled her eyes, almost wishing that she hadn't left her bow behind. "Oh, shut up, Snotlout."

Snotlout ignored her. "Can I transfer to the class with the cool Vikings?"

Gobber ignored him, guiding Hiccup away and speaking him in a low voice as he formed the teens into a line. Glancing upward, Natalya barely managed not to curse when she spotted a single, distinctly-shaped cloud hovering far overhead, the only patch in a clear, blue sky. Perhaps ranting to Skyfire last night about not wanting to fight dragons and the probability of serious injury had not been such a good idea. Now it looked like her dragon had decided to hover around to make sure she was safe.

Swiftly turning her attention back to Gobber before anyone could ask what she was staring at, Natalya tried to focus. "Behind these doors are just a few of the many species you will learn to fight. The Deadly Nadder, the Hideous Zippleback, the Monstrous Nightmare, the Terrible Terror and â€" WILL YOU STOP THAT!"

The yell had been directed at Fishlegs, who had been rattling off Dragon statistics at each name. Fishlegs froze, but whispered to Hiccup as Gobber introduced the Gronkle, his hand on the lever that would open its cage. Snotlout wasn't exactly clever, but even he could guess what was going to happen next. "Wait, aren't you going to train us?"

Gobber ignored, or just didn't notice, the very obvious worry from all of the teens. "I believe in learning on the job."

Natalya swore loudly as the Gronkle burst out of the cage and the trainees scattered as Gobber blithely continued his instruction. "Today is about survival. If you get blasted, you're dead. Quick, what's the first thing ye'll need?"

Hiccup looked like he wanted nothing more than to be elsewhere. "A doctor?"

Fishlegs looked faintly hysterical. "Plus-five speed?"

Natalya dodged Snotlout, trying to find the fastest way to the exit, which was promptly blocked by Gobber. "A quick escape route?"

Astrid, as usual, had the right answer: "A shield!"

Natalya glared at her cousin, wishing that the other girl was a bit less perfect. Pushing that aside for later, she grabbed the nearest shield and threw herself behind the weapons rack, taking cover until she had a better idea of what was going on. Hiccup was struggling to pick up a shield while holding onto his axe, while Astrid had grabbed a shield and was standing in a ready position. Someone needed to take the twins aside and tell them that when you are in immediate danger of being roasted by a dragon, it is not the time to fight over which twin gets which shield, especially since the shield was hit by a blast from the Gronkle, spinning both twins around and causing Gobber to call them out.

The remaining four were back in a more or less steady line as Gobber retrieved Natalya from her hiding place, pushing her out into combat. "Those shields are good for another thing: noise. Make lots of it; it'll throw off a dragon's aim. Now, all dragons have a limited number of shots; how many does a Gronkle have?"

Hiccup had taken Natalya's place in the rack as soon as Gobber's back was turned, but Snotlout was still running as he shouted a guess, "Five?"

Fishlegs made the mistake of standing still to correct him. "No, no: six!"

Fishlegs was so pleased at knowing the right answer that he failed to notice the Gronkle coming up behind him until it blasted his shield to bits, causing Natalya to narrow her eyes in thought. So far, the Gronkle had only made two shots, despite ample opportunity, and Natalya had seen dragons fighting enough times to realize that the Gronkle was aiming for the shields, rather than the trainees themselves.

Lowering her shield down and to the side, she beat a quick tattoo on the edge, drawing the dragon's attention while Gobber was focussing on the others. The Gronkle didn't try to blast her, but flew forward in a maneuver that Natalya recognized from over-excited Terrible Terrors zooming in to greet her. Deliberately, she fell backwards to lessen the impact, the Gronkle nuzzling her for a few seconds before Snotlout actually tackled it, knocking the dragon away before he retreated back to Astrid. "Hey, did you see me? How cool a move was that?"

Smiling in relief and at Astrid's expression, Natalya retreated to where Fishlegs and the Twins were sitting, content to sit back and observe.

Snotlout was still trying to " and failing miserably to flirt with

Astrid, and like Fishlegs, was so intent that he failed to notice the dragon until it was too late. Astrid rolled over to where Hiccup had been dragged out of hiding, and then darted away again as the Gronkle's next shot landed between them, and Natalya spotted a problem.

Hiccup did not have his father's size or build, but there were several unmistakable similarities, especially if the dragon was disoriented, and the dragons had no love for Stoik the Vast. Astrid looked indignant when the Gronkle ignored her, despite clearly being the greater threat, and went after Hiccup, who did the sensible thing and bolted.

Natalya's best and only friend wasn't fast enough, though, and she scrambled to her feet again as the Gronkle backed Hiccup up against a wall, opening its mouth in preparation to flame the youth. Natalya darted forward, not even knowing what she could do, but Gobber got there first, yanking the Gronkle's jaw so that the fire missed Hiccup by inches.

Natalya collapsed in relief as Gobber dragged the Gronkle back, before Astrid dragged her back upright, hissing about being a 'family embarrassment'. Natalya returned a glare, "So, what else is new? I've been the family embarrassment since the hour I was born, and none of you have failed to let me know it!"

Something that might have been regret flew across Astrid's face as Gobber closed the Gronkle's cage. "Remember, a dragon will always, ALWAYS, go for the kill."

Natalya and Hiccup exchanged looks. But then why hadn't the Night Fury?

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><p>AN: I decided that the last chapter felt too rushed and that I hadn't put in enough build-up. So, I made it longer, added parts of the next chapter, and split it in half. I hope you enjoy it, and don't forget to tell me about things that need improvement. 7 favourites, 11 follows and 1 reviews last chapter? We can do better than that!_

Also, voting for pairings is still open.

Thanks,

Nat

6. Chapter 6

_Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the

associated characters._

Summary: See Previous Chapters

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><p>CHAPTER SIX<p>

Natalya and Hiccup searched through the woods for the Night Fury, armed with a few fish saved from the dragon's daily catch and Skyfire, who was following a scent trail from Hiccup's bola.

Hiccup found the first sign, a few scattered, blue-black scales, perfect for blending into the night sky, at the edge of a lovely hollow. They both found the second sign, which was a very frustrated Night Fury attempting to climb out, gliding back down when he failed. Natalya's eyes widened in awe, ignoring the scratching sound of Hiccup drawing next to her. "Good thing we brought the fish. The poor thing must be hungry, after two days."

Hiccup rubbed something out, his voice as soft as hers, but brimming with curiosity. "Why doesn't he just... fly away?"

Natalya considered, examining the Night Fury. Her examination was interrupted when the dragon looked up and spotted them, growling softly. She took a deep breath. "I'll go first. You follow with the fish."

Natalya started to climb down, but Hiccup stopped her. "No. He feels threatened right now, and frustrated. We'll leave the fish for now, and come back tomorrow. Dragons are curious, and hopefully the curiosity will make him less hostile."

That was total guesswork, of course, but experience suggested that dragons, like most animals, were less aggressive when they were fed. Besides, they needed to get back to the village for non-combat dragon training and dinner.

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><p>Of course, it had to start raining before they reached the village, much less the Mead Hall, which meant that Skyfire stopped just long enough to deposit them back on the ground before flying off to play in the impending storm.<p>

Resigning themselves to getting drenched - at least Natalya would have Skyfire sneak back sometime during the night to warm her up - the teens made their way back.

They were swiftly approaching 'soaked' when they reached the Mead Hall, only to discover that the class had started without them. Exchanging looks, they opened the doors to Astrid's voice. "I mis-timed my somersault dive. It was sloppy, it threw off my reverse-tumble."

Natalya rolled her eyes at the perfectionist streak as Ruffnut smirked, sending the brunette girl an almost understanding look. "Yeah, we noticed. Nice to know you aren't perfect."

She gave her twin a victorious head-slam as Astrid reached for her

axe, which Gobber had moved out of reach and Snotlout tried to flatter Astrid back into a better mood, moving over to block any chance of Hiccup or Natalya sitting down. Hiccup, used to it, merely swiped a chicken leg and a tankard, sitting at the next table over as Gobber continued. "What about Natalya?"

Fishlegs shrugged. Natalya hadn't really done enough in the ring to be worthy of note or criticism, unlike the twins; who needed to stop fighting, Snotlout; who needed to stop flirting and pay attention, or even himself; who needed to focus less on stats and more on what was going on. "She doesn't move around enough. The Gronkle could have flattened her."

Tuffnut grinned, "That would have been awesome! All the destruction! And then the dragon would blow up because she isn't a proper Viking - ow!"

His sister had hit him, though that was hardly unusual, and Hiccup was aiming an impressive glare at the male twin.

Natalya rolled her eyes, more than used to it, and leaned against Hiccup's table. "I didn't want to be there in the first place, and that slowed me down."

Gobber either ignored or missed the barb. "Right, where did Hiccup go wrong?"

That had a more enthusiastic response. "Uh, he showed up?"

"He didn't get eaten? OW!" Natalya's tankard bounced off Snotlout's head.

"He's never where he should be."

The last one was from Astrid, which probably explained why it was the only one to make any real impact. Like Natalya, Hiccup was used to the random insults on uselessness from his peers. Natalya gave the other teens a dark look. "He had very little relevant training before we got tossed into the ring?"

That was true. When most viking children entered weapons training, Hiccup had been apprenticed to Gobber, instead. He had read books that Natalya's father had in stock, tried out the moves with a practice sword...and accidentally knocked over a rack in the forge, alerting Stoick and Gobber who had banned him from continuing.

From his expression, Gobber remembered that as well as Hiccup did. "Thank you, girls. You need to live and breathe this stuff." He dropped a book on the table. "The Dragon Manuel. Everything we know about every dragon we know of."

A rumble of thunder distracted him from the look that Natalya and Hiccup exchanged, thinking of the more comprehensive copy in Natalya's room, focussing more on the dragons themselves, rather than the best ways to kill them. Gobber turned his attention back to the teens. "Ah, no attacks tonight. Study up."

Tuffnut blanched, returning to the present from whatever shenanigans he had been planning. "Wait, you mean read?"

His twin echoed the horror, "While we're still alive?"

Snotlout tried to build himself up again. "Why read words when you can just kill the stuff the words tell you about?"

Fishlegs, of course, was more enthusiastic. "Oh, I've read it like seven times! There's this water dragon that sprays boiling water at your face -"

Natalya sighed. "Scauldron: Tidal class, dangerous but easily dehydrated. Best idea is to avoid it if you can."

Fishlegs gave her an annoyed look. "The Dragon Manuel says to kill on sight. And there's this other one that buries itself -"

Tuffnut cut him short before Natalya could figure out if he meant the Whispering Death. "Yeah, yeah, that sounds great. There was a chance I was gonna read it -"

Ruffnut took up the thought seamlessly, "- but now..."

Snotlout shoved his chair back, "You guys read, I'll go kill things."

He strode out of the Hall, quickly followed by Fishlegs and the twins. Hiccup tried to look casual as he walked over to where Astrid sat. "So, I guess we'll just share?"

Astrid shoved the book at him as she stood up. "Read it."

Natalya tried not to let the jealous anger show on her face. "Do you think Gobber will mind if we take it out of the hall? I have way too much to do back at the shop to study here tonight."

Hiccup shrugged. "I doubt that anyone else is going to try and read it, so he probably won't mind. Want to see how it measures up to your copy?"

Natalya smiled. "If you feel like reading out loud while I cook, certainly. We need to start a new chapter for Night Furies, too."

Hiccup's smile as they headed back out into the rain made the entire wretched day worth it.

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><p>It was a not-unwelcome surprise when Natalya delivered a few loaves down to the docks and saw a very familiar ship sailing in. Of course, usually her father's little ship didn't have the sails torn to ribbons or the mast cracked. Finishing her delivery, she ran down to where the ship was dropping anchor. "Father! That was a short trip!"<p>

Trader Johann returned her hug, staggering a little. "I was blown off-course by a storm, and the ship was struck by lightning. I even saw what could have been a Skrill! Looked a bit different, but it was a narrow escape! The dragon grabbed a rope and dragged my ship and dragged it halfway here before it flew off!"

Skyfire had been playing with lightning last night. Natalya would have to have a word with her about caution. Or at least sound her father out on his opinion of dragons. "So, you'll be here long enough for repairs? I don't know how fast that will go, most of the Vikings are off on another hunt, and the teens are stuck in Dragon Training. It's almost mandatory that you at least know how to fight them, even if you don't turn it into a profession."

Natalya's father gave her a sharp look. "You mean to say that they put you in Dragon Training, when you have your own business to run? You don't even like fighting! Did the Hoffersons actually agree to this?"

Natalya shrugged. "I don't know, they're off on a hunt. It isn't totally impossible, though. The majority of my regular customers are away now, so I wouldn't be getting much custom as it is. I don't like fighting dragons, though. Surely there has to be a different way?"

Her father smiled as they began walking up the hill to the wood workers shop. "You look and act more like your mother every day, but then you open your mouth and I could swear Valhallarama was speaking."

That was something that had puzzled her for a while. "I've been meaning to ask, why did some people call Hiccups mother Valhallarama, but mother always called her Valka?"

Her father smiled. "Her name was Valhallarama, but she was as beautiful and fierce as a Valkyrie, so her closest ones called her Valka. She and Enna were very close friends, even when a lot of folk wanted her to stay away."

Natalya lowered her eyes, "When she got pregnant with me, right?"

Trader Johann nodded, his arm firmly around his daughter's shoulders. "Yes. Her family didn't want anything to endanger the betrothal with Stoick. He had only been Chief for a few months, after his father and so many other Chiefs and heirs were killed in that dragon raid, and they didn't want Valka in 'unacceptable company' that might make Stoick look elsewhere for a bride."

Natalya huffed at that, leaning into her father's side. "Stupid of them. If the Chief refused to re-marry after more than ten years after his wife was declared dead, he must have loved her enough not to care who her friends were!"

Trader Johann sighed. "I agree with you there, lass. It's only a pity that not everyone has so much sense."

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><p>Natalya left her father in the village, running back to her Hall to meet Skyfire and go visit the flock. She pinned the beautiful dragon with a stern look. "Do you know anything about my father's ship getting hit with lightning after he saw a dragon that looked like a Skrill?"<p>

Dragons might not speak Norse, but the flock had picked up enough

from Hiccup and Natalya - who quickly got tired of trying to mime everything - to understand the basics. Skyfire lowered her head and nudged the poleaxe leaning against the door frame. She nuzzled Natalya and gave the most weebegone look a dragon was capable of, rolled onto her back, then leaped up and curled around Natalya protectively.

Natalya tried to puzzle that out. "You thought I was unhappy about dragon training and hoped that my father would be able to protect me from having to continue?"

Skyfire crooned, bumping Natalya with her head. Natalya hugged her dragon back, making yet another comparison between dragons and very young children. Her father wouldn't be able to withdraw her from Dragon Training without the Hoffersons' agreement, as they were her primary guardians, but it was very sweet of her dragon to try. "Come on, Skyfire. Let's go visit the babies."

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><p>AN: Yay, another chapter is done!_

Yes, there was a bit of fluff in this chapter, but hopefully it wasn't too bad. How did you like the reconciliation of the Movie! And Book! Names for Hiccup's mother?

Now, I'm still deciding on pairings. I have a basic storyline for both Hiccup/Astrid or Hiccup/Natalya, but I'm conflicted on which one to go with, as well as what the other pairings should be. Feedback and voting would be especially appreciated.

With Eleven favourites and Fourteen follows, it shouldn't be hard to get more than one person to offer constructive criticism.

7. Chapter 7

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

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><p>CHAPTER SEVEN<p>

Natalya swore and dove out of the way as the Deadly Nadder sent a volley of spikes at her, narrowly avoiding the poisonous tips.

Gobber had turned the Training Arena into a twisted maze of high wooden walls, where the trainees were trying to avoid the unfortunately very nimble Nadder, which was more than capable of

jumping on top of the walls to see where they were.

Of course, she wasn't quite the worst off. That would be her father, who was watching from outside the arena and on the verge of a full-blown panic attack. Or possibly Hiccup, who was rather dissatisfied with the information in the Book of Dragons. "So, I noticed that the book had nothing on Night Furies. Is there a follow up book, or a sequel, or a Night Fury pamphlet - Gah!"

Hiccup and Natalya had talked about asking Gobber, the closest thing Berk had to an official dragon expert, about ideas to tame a wild dragon, but now was perhaps not the best time.

The Nadder didn't care what Hiccup was talking about, just that he wasn't running about like the other teens. Hiccup narrowly dodged a burst of fire, earning an annoyed comment from Gobber, "Focus, Hiccup! You're not even trying!"

Hiccup briefly ducked into the Nadder's blind spot, then bolted as Gobber continued, earning a nasty glare and dark mutter from Trader Johan. "Today is all about attack. Nadder's are quick and light on their feet. Your job is to be quicker and lighter."

The Nadder jumped onto a wall, spotted someone, and jumped down again. Stuck in a dead end, Natalya used her poleaxe to vault over a wall, nearly flattening the twins as she landed. Somewhere nearby, Fishlegs screamed. "I'm beginning to seriously question your teaching methods!"

Natalya broke away from the twins as they cackled. Gobber ignored both Fishlegs and a glare that strongly suggested a lack of scrap metal in the near future. "Look for its blind spot. Every dragon has one. Find it, hide in it, and strike."

There was a loud yell from where Natalya had left the twins, followed by Gobber's almost bored voice. "Blind spot, yes. Deaf spot, hmm, not so much."

A vantage point to see what was going on seemed like a very good idea right now. Vaulting up onto a wall, which was far easier to balance on than an acrobatic dragon, she spotted the Nadder chasing the twins and Astrid and Snotlout dashing ahead of Hiccup, who stopped to talk to Gobber. "So, how would one go about training a Night Fury?"

Gobber sighed, clearly hoping that some kind of answer would get Hiccup to concentrate on the task at hand. "No ones ever seen one and lived to tell the tale. NOW GET IN THERE!"

Hiccup rolled his eyes, "I know, I know, but hypothetically..."

Something cut him off, and there was a long pause. Natalya jumped down from her perch as the Nadder jumped up, though fortunately it was a lot more interested in something in the direction that Astrid and Snotlout had gone.

That was an educated guess, but quickly reinforced by hearing Snotlout's loud voice. "Hold off, babe, I got this."

A brief pause, in which Natalya grabbed the twins and started moving quickly in the opposite direction, punctuated by a Nadder squawk and Snotlout's voice, now significantly less confident. "The sun was in my eyes, Astrid! Do you want me to block out the sun? Because I can do that!"

Natalya rolled her eyes and found herself leading the way as the twins cackled. As long as they were entertained by things blowing up, they weren't so bad. If only they didn't take quite so much glee in the misfortune of other people.

This was about the time the Nadder went crazy, knocking over the walls and sending everyone running. Astrid came flying over a wall, landing on Hiccup and trapping her axe in his shield, but the Nadder rampaged straight past them. Snotlout and Fishlegs both ducked behind Natalya (she expected a lack of books and affordable weapons on her father's next trip), who took a deep breath.

Time to try something that most Vikings would probably label as stupid.

She planted the spike of her poleax between two flagstones, gripping just below the axe head and swinging herself around to land on the Nadder's back, very different to the four-limbed, more serpentine dragons she usually rode. Still, she managed to stay on pressing on a spot behind the spines that usually made Nadders purr like a kitten. At the least, it calmed a little, and she managed to turn it away from the four teens.

Unfortunately, this turned it toward Hiccup and Astrid, who were trying to untangle themselves. Astrid wrenched her axe back, taking Hiccup's shield with it, and Natalya threw herself clear as Astrid swung her weapon, attached shield and all, hitting the Nadder on the side of the head. Dazed, it staggered back to its cage, and Natalya made a note to check on it later as she helped Hiccup to his feet and Astrid rounded on both of them. "Is this some kind of joke to you? Our parents war is about to become ours! Figure out which side you are on!"

Hiccup stiffened. On Berk, suggesting that he might be on the side of the dragons was just short of accusing him of treason! Concern for the hatchlings wasn't the only reason he and Natalya had never said a word about the dragons or the valley where there was a chance any of the Vikings hearing them. Crush or not, Astrid had no right to speak like that. "What did you just say?"

Astrid's eyes flashed. "You heard me! Our parents have been fighting dragons for generations, and all either of you can do is get in the way! What must your parents think about such failures?"

The flash in Astrid's eyes was drowned by the Skrill-bright fire in Natalya's green ones, in contrast to her cold voice. "My father agrees that my skills lie elsewhere, and my mother would have supported that decision. As for sides, why should I do something I'm not suited to, to help people who have treated both of us like dirt for years?"

Not waiting to hear what anyone else had to say, she grabbed her poleaxe and stalked off, gesturing to Hiccup that she would meet him later.

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><p>Trader Johan found his daughter in her kitchen, viciously pounding a batch of dough. "That was a very strong speech. I'm sorry I wasn't here to do more."<p>

Natalya shrugged, beginning to shape the dough, making several loaves, and kneading yak butter into the remaining quarter, to make it flakey. "It wasn't so bad when mother was alive, and they backed off when they figured out that being nasty to the baker results in stale goods or no service at all. Hiccup doesn't even have that."

Her father sat down, lining the loaves up on a few trays and putting them in the oven, mercifully not seeing the Terror napping in the heat. "Still, I should have done something before now."

Natalya wiped her hands on a cloth and walked over to hug him. "You've done far more than most fathers in your position would, and I know that you love me. I can deal with a bit of harassment; I just lost my temper this morning."

Trader Johan returned the hug, wondering again which parent Natalya had inherited her pragmatic nature from. Like her mother, aunt and cousin, his daughter felt deeply, but seldom showed it. Astrid radiated hostility, but that was more her competitive nature and discomfort with 'weak' emotions. Maybe he should corner Hiccup at some point and see what he thought.

For now, all he could really do was take some of the strain off her shoulders. Bringing some water off the fire, he started washing up as Natalya kneaded fruit into the buttery dough and added a small amount of her precious spices. She rolled them into smaller buns and put those on another tray, covering them with a cloth before checking on the bread and sitting down with some mending.

Trader Johan turned the conversation to more lighthearted matters, launching into a story of his last journey, only slightly exaggerated. Finally, Natalya took the bread out of the oven and put it aside to cool. "I think I'm going to go for a walk, until the pastries finish rising. Gather my thoughts a bit. Do you need to check how the repairs to your ship are going."

He did, and was familiar with the need to have your own time and space to deal with problems. "And have a word with Gobber about training, since the Hoffersons are absent. I'll see you after lessons tonight."

She would need to sneak Skyfire through one of the upper windows, and back out before dawn, in that case, but she said nothing. Natalya hugged her father once more and left to find Hiccup.

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><p>It was well into afternoon by the time Natalya finished with the hatchlings and took the older ones for a quick hunt and fishing trip. A leg of wild boar was in her bag as a peace offering, the rest of the butchered animal lying outside the hollow to take home for stew that night.<p>

From the remains of a fish Near the rock where Hiccup was sitting and sketching in the ground, probably trying to get the Night Fury to at least accept his presence, her friend had come upon the same idea. Watching from the ledge, Natalya smiled as the black dragon slowly approached.

Slowly, she guided Skyfire to land at the opposite end of the hollow, throwing the boar leg to land near the Night Fury. Hiccup brightened at seeing her. "Hi, Natalya. You missed Toothless making me eat regurgitated fish."

Natalya giggled, choosing not to mention that the terrors had done the same thing to her on their first meeting, though they had nudged the last of the fish toward her, rather than eating it first. She looked at the drawing, a very good likeness of Toothless (either the dragon had retractable teeth, or they had been knocked out when it was shot down), and looked up to see Skyfire sidling up to the Night Fury, cooing at him and offering him the boar meat.

Oh, bright Freya, please don't let her dragon be developing a crush on the Night Fury! Natalya didn't even want to think about the potential offspring of that union, or what a heartbroken dragon would be like!

It didn't matter for now, though, as Toothless was picking up a branch in his mouth, dragging it through the dirt to form his own picture. Natalya tilted her head. "It looks a lot like Berk from above," she gave Hiccup a playful look, "or a very bad drawing of you."

Hiccup looked indignant, but chose to ignore the joke in favour of stepping back to look at the drawing for himself. Toothless growled as Hiccup stepped on one of the carefully drawn lines, but cooed when he lifted his foot.

Slowly, Hiccup began to step between the lines, leaping and twirling with an agility that he had never displayed before, as though the Night Fury had somehow brought him to life.

He stopped, barely inches from the lethal dragon, and slowly extended his hand, not daring to look up. The world seemed to stand still as Toothless closed the tiny remaining distance, resting his nose against Hiccup's palm for a few brief moments.

Then the moment was broken, and Toothless ran-glided to the other end of the hollow, where a patch of burned grass suggested he had made a bed.

Natalya took her friend's hand and pulled him over to a pouting Skyfire, leaping to the top of the hollow and walking a short way before flying away.

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><p>AN: So far, I have one vote for Hiccup/Astrid, and one for Hiccup/Natalya. I'm getting close to the point where it has to go one way or the other, so send in your votes.

To be clear, I am not trying to bash Astrid, but her character near the beginning of the movie was not a nice one, even if she did mellow out later. Right now, she is driven, competitive, and doesn't understand why Hiccup is even in Dragon Training. Also, the story is told through Natalya's eyes, who is not inclined to like her cousin right now, as Astrid seems to have everything Natalya doesn't.

I meant to have this up earlier, but the hotels we stayed in during our Country Roads of Scotland (beautiful in the summer and more than worth a visit, especially when 'chasing your roots') had very limited wifi.

Thanks, and let me know what you think.

8. Chapter 8 - Astrid's Interlude

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon

Summary: See Previous Chapters

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><p>CHAPTER EIGHT - INTERLUDE**

Astrid had never really understood why she and her cousin didn't get along, when their mothers had been so close.

Yes, they were almost three years apart in age, but Hiccup wasn't much older than Astrid, and they got along fine. So well, in fact, that Astrid wondered if her cousin wasn't setting herself up for heartbreak.

No matter how much of a failure Hiccup was, the son of the Chief of Berk would never be allowed to marry a bastard who brought nothing of value to the union, not even skills as a warrior.

Perhaps that was the reason. Natalya had always done things her own way, and if she wanted to be a baker instead of a warrior, then she would do so, and to Hel with what everyone else thought!

Maybe it was because Astrid was popular, with two affectionate parents, while Natalya was treated with barely hidden scorn most of the time, and while it was obvious that Trader Johan loved her (especially by the way he was muttering about looking through records for their favourite items, just so he could NOT stock them before his next visit) Natalya's father wasn't around much.

Astrid could admit that she was very dedicated and a bit competitive, and that made her harsh to people who didn't give their all in everything they set their mind to. Bread making didn't require any real effort, and all the tinkering Hiccup did only ever ended in disaster, as far as Astrid and the rest of Berk could see.

War was in Astrid's blood, in stark contrast to Trader Johan, and Aunt Enna had sided with Valhallarama in wanting to look for another way to fight dragons. It was hardly a wonder that she had never seen Natalya (or Hiccup' for that matter) as worthy of being Vikings, lacking the emotion and fire that were needed in combat.

Until yesterday. For the first time, Hiccup had born a stunning likeness to Stoick at his most calmly dangerous, and Astrid had never known Natalya to even raise her voice, much less shout as she had at the end of the session.

(And Astrid had to admit that she agreed with the twins. Jumping on a dragon like that? Took serious guts, even if Astrid hadn't seen her until she started swinging.)

Maybe Astrid did have everything that Natalya was lacking, and perhaps she hadn't treated her cousin as well as she could have, but it hadn't been that bad, no matter what Natalya shouted in the heat of anger.

Had it?

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><p>AN: So, a quick peek into Astrid's thoughts.

I'm posting this just before I get on the plane, and if don't know when I'll next have the chance to update. Hopefully it won't take too long.

I'm also thinking of doing a few more interludes like this throughout the story, so let me know who, if any, you would like to see. Last chance to vote, and I have both potentials mapped out, so look out for that in the future.

Thanks!

9. Chapter 9 - Dragons' Interlude

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

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><p>CHAPTER NINE: Dragons Interlude**

Dragons had three things in common: Flight, a taste for fish, and pure adoration for their sadly-deformed nest-parents.

Nest-Mother had been the first, roaring to frighten away the fish-stealers, who would have attacked her like they did the small-groupers, if the small-groupers hadn't carried her to safety.

It was risky, since some breeds got testy if you didn't let them prove how strong they were, but Nest-Mother had given them her own food, and played with them until she had to leave again.

White-fire had brought her back the next day, though, and gloated about it for hours. After that, Nest-Mother had visited every day, and eventually brought Nest-Father with her.

Normally, no dragon would consider tending the young of another, but both nest-parents had smelled so strongly of sad and alone that the general agreement was that perhaps something had happened to their young, or their deformity meant that they couldn't have hatchlings.

Time went on, and the nest-parents taught them how to fly and hunt as a group, which normally only the small-groupers did. Nest-Mother took a small portion of the kills, as was proper, but they all ate well.

One day, Nest-Father stopped coming as much, and white-fire said that it was because they had found a dark-one, who had been badly hurt, and Nest-Father was helping dark-one to be able to fly again, and white-fire had first call.

None of them were quite sure why white-fire thought she needed to call it, since there were no other dark-ones in the valley, but older females could be silly sometimes

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><p>Dark-one didn't know what to make of the two human nestlings.<p>

Yes, one of them had freed him from the heavy vines that had taken his tail, but didn't they understand that he was a dark-one? He could turn them into crispy cinders in a wing beat!

Well, the other kept a safe distance, but she flew with not-entirely-white-fire, so he didn't trust much in her common sense, either.

Not-entirely-white-fire had explained about the valley, and the scent of _alone _that had hung on them at first, and that they were like misformed adoptive nest-parents.

Well, if that was the case, and they were willing to take such care of hatchlings not their own, then dark-one could let the male human nestling touch him, if it meant _that_ much to him.

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><p>AN: The next chapter is almost finished, but I go back to work tomorrow, so here's another little interlude to tide you over._

Hopefully I didn't do too badly with the dragons. I was aiming for a balance of intelligent but very child-like in reasoning, so constructive criticism on that would be much appreciated.

Thanks!

10. Chapter 10

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters.

Summary: See Previous Chapters

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><p>CHAPTER NINE**

It wasn't storming that night, so class was held on the watchtower, dinner eaten around a small fire.

Natalya nibbled at her chicken, more concerned with the unobtrusive Thundercloud hovering nearby. At least, since it was night-time, it was less likely that people would notice. Even better, tonight Gobber was telling stories of old battles, rather than lecturing them on the lesson. "...and with one bite, that dragon took my hand, and I saw the look on it's face: I was delicious."

Natalya wasn't so sure about that, but whatever made the Blacksmith feel better. She knew better than to comment, anyway, especially since the big Viking was still speaking. "He must have passed the word, because it wasn't more than a month later that another one of them took my leg!"

Fishlegs toyed with the two drumsticks he held. "Isn't it weird to think that your hand was inside a dragon? Like, if your mind was still in control of it, you could have reached out and crushed its heart or something?"

Natalya stared at Fishlegs, mouth slightly open in obvious disgust and totally oblivious to Astris wearing the exact same expression from her seat next to Fishlegs. "That is probably the most morbid and disturbing thing I have ever heard. Thanks for the nightmares."

Fishlegs turned slightly green as he thought over how his words must have sounded, but was prevented from replying by Snotlout's usual over-compensation. "I swear I'm so angry right now! I'll avenge your beautiful hand, and your beautiful foot! I'll rip off the legs of every dragon I see! With my face."

Hiccup's cousin somehow didn't notice the eye-rolls from pretty much everyone as Gobber shook his head. "No, it's the wings and the tail that you want! If it can't fly, it can't get away. A downed dragon is a dead dragon."

Meeting Hiccup's eyes, Natalya could practically see the realisation dawning in them both. Toothless hadn't flown away because his tailfin had been torn off! His wings could get him airborne, but without both tailfins, he couldn't stay in the air or steer! They needed to get to Hiccup's notebook, fast, but they needed a distraction first.

Gobber provided it by standing up and yawning. "Right, I'm off to bed, and you should be too. Tomorrow we get started on the big boys, slowly but surely making our way up to the Monstrous Nightmare. But who'll win the honour of killing it?"

Hurrying down to the workshop, Natalya didn't hear the various boastful replies. The unobtrusive thundercloud followed them to the forge, resolving itself into Skyfire as Hiccup was stoking the forge, sketches of Toothless spread out nearby.

Skyfire could generate the lightning-like fire of a Skrill if she wanted, but most of the time it was more like most dragon fire. A ruined sword meant for the scrap pile provided metal that Skyfire heated to melting point, and hiccup fastened into long rods, examining her tail for comparison purposes. The rivets on a shield held them together, while Natalya cut up Hiccup's spare apron to serve as a replacement for the fin itself, sewing it onto the frame with quick, neat stitches.

Finally, they surveyed the finished product with a kind of quiet pride. Hiccup eased Skyfire away from where she was sniffing the tailfin, "Do you think it'll work?"

Natalya smiled, stretching her cramped fingers. "I think we'll need to try it to find out - and that I'll need to try and get some leather off Father to replace the apron before Gobber notices - but probably."

Hiccup beamed at her. "If you can take care of the nestlings in the morning, I'll try it out then. Er, I may need to raid your nets for some fish to distract him. I can only sneak a few out of the stores."

Natalya returned the smile. "Go ahead." Her smile faded and she sighed, "You know, there are times I wish we could tell the others, not just so they'd stop talking about fighting dragons, but so they could see that we aren't useless just because we're different."

Hiccup wrapped an arm around his friend, knowing the feeling all too well and trying to lighten the atmosphere. "Tell the twins about the kind of explosions a Zippleback can create. They'd jump at the idea."

Natalya laughed; Ruffnut and Tuffnut probably would try to tame a Zippleback, just for that. She leaned her head on Hiccup's shoulder for a brief moment. "Put the forge out and get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow."

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><p>Porridge was bubbling nicely in the pot when Natalya awoke the next morning, tinged the slight gold of honey and cinnamon being added for flavour. Her father's addition, no doubt, as was the small dish of berries on the table.<p>

Natalya smiled as she sat down, still braiding her hair. "Thank you, Father. My porridge always comes out lumpy, for some reason."

Trader Johan smiled back, even if the porridge had been an attempt to make himself feel less useless at taking care of his only child. "Don't feel too bad. The lumps in Enna's porridge could be fired out of a ballista, and size would be the only difference you'd notice."

Natalya giggled and changed the subject. "Do you have any leather in stock? Hiccup's apron was a casualty of dragons, and we'd like to replace it before Gobber finds out."

Johan laughed. He'd seen the look on Hiccup's face when the two of them walked back into the village late yesterday afternoon, and the matching spring in his daughter's step. He and Enna had been like that, long ago before her parents had refused permission, when nothing had mattered but how they felt toward each other.

He grew serious again. "I'll check my stock before I leave this afternoon. I'll be back as soon as I can though."

His daughter's smile dimmed a little, but she put on a brave face. "I'll put some supplies together. Business is always slower when the warriors are away."

Johan reached over the table to cover her hand with his. "Don't take what they say to heart, dear one. You're stronger than they know, and you have loyal company in young Hiccup."

Natalya's smile brightened again at the name, which cheered him as much as it worried him. But both teens were sensible, and knew the consequences too well to do anything rash in the absence of parental supervision. "I know, Father. I'll be fine."

* * *

><p>'Fine' was a bit of an exaggeration, but better for her father's health and business than letting him observe another session of Dragon Training.<p>

From Hiccup's drenched but overjoyed appearance (and the brief glimpse of a Nightfury in flight while Natalya was riding Skyfire to the valley) when he showed up at her hall half an hour before the day's training was due to start, the tailfin had been a success.

Hiccup had also been saying something about a trick to use against the Zippleback and brains over brawn, a bit too excited to realise that at least half of what he was saying was muffled by a towel, but they had been too close to running late for Natalya to ask him to repeat whatever he had said slower.

"Today is about teamwork!" At least Gobber sounded as cheerful as ever, despite the door of the Zippleback cage bursting open to engulf the entire arena in a thick haze of smoke.

Due to uneven numbers, Natalya was stuck with Ruffnut and Astrid, which none of them were happy about and even Gobber should have spotted as a recipe for disaster. For all their arguing, the twins worked best as a team, while Astrid and Natalya were still at odds from the previous day.

But either the blacksmith didn't notice, or he decided that they needed to work together anyway. "Now, a wet dragon head can't light it's fire. The Hideous Zippleback is extra tricky. One head breathes gas; the other head lights it. Your job is to know which is which."

All three girls muttered something rude as the smoke surrounded them, which was fortunate for Fishlegs, who was spouting off statistics and about to be punched if they could actually see him. "Razor-sharp, serrated fangs, which inject venom for pre-digestion. Prefers ambush attacks, crushing it's victims -"

Hiccup, partnering Fishlegs, didn't appear to take the commentary much better than anyone else. "Will you please stop that!"

On the other side of the arena, Tuffnut and Snotlout were shoving each other out of the way, eager to get to the dragon first. "If that dragon shows either of its faces, I'm gonna - there!"

Natalya was well-positioned, in the sense that both Ruffnut and Astrid were directly in the line of fire, and her instinctive step backward saved her from much more than a mild splashing, unlike the other two. "Hey! It's us, you idiots!"

Perhaps a side effect of being twins with Ruffnut, Tuffnut was unconcerned. "Whoa, your butts are getting bigger; we thought you were a dragon."

Snotlout was a bit more alert to potential warning signs, as both Astrid and Natalya narrowed their eyes. He tried to backpedal, knowing that this wasn't going to end nicely. "Not that there's anything wrong with a dragon-esque figure... Oof!"

Astrid punched him as Ruffnut threw her bucket at her brother's head, reasoning that Natalya and Astrid still had their buckets, which was still enough for one per Zippleback head.

Although not for long, as something dragged Tuffnut into the smoke, and a tail came sweeping out of nowhere, knocking Astrid off her feet and making her drop her bucket.

Natalya dodged Tuffnut when he came tearing out of the smoke, followed by a head, only for Astrid to grab Natalya's bucket and throw it at the head, while her cousin's eyes were still trying to follow the curve of the neck. She tried to grab it back, but missed. "That's the right head!"

Her wording was bad, she could admit. Natalya had meant 'left and right', because the left head was the one that lit the gas from the

right head, but Astrid probably thought that she meant 'right' as in 'correct'.

Luckily for everyone, Natalya still smelled strongly of Skrill, and a certain thundercloud had taken advantage of the gas and smoke to sneak in and drop the disguise for a moment, un-noticed by the teens that were frozen facing the Zippleback. It was good timing, as the current head started to emit gas.

The Zippleback, like many before it, decided that it wasn't worth tangling with the second-most dangerous species, and left to find easier prey. Natalya waved frantically for Skyfire to get out of there before the thinning smoke failed entirely, hearing Fishlegs comment in the background, "Chances of survival are dwindling to single digits now."

Astrid punched Natalya in the bicep. "You said that was the right head!"

Natalya punched her back, already missing her father and fed up with Dragon Training and everything to do with it. "Did I sound like I was cheering you on? Right heads breathe gas, left heads make sparks! Anyone who gave the Book of Dagon's more than a passing glance knows that!"

Or anyone who has been watching baby Zipplebacks grow up for the past ten years, but whatever. They stopped arguing when Fishlegs ran by, yelling with terror and trailing green fumes and Gobber yelled "Now, Hiccup!"

The last of the smoke cleared, and Natalya could see Hiccup throw the water up at the correct Zippleback head, which calmly lifted itself out of range. "Aw, come on!"

The Zippleback roared and lunged forward, then just as suddenly reared up, backing away as Hiccup advanced. "Back! Back! Don't make me tell you again! Back into your cage!"

The Zippleback retreated as Hiccup opened his vest just enough for Natalya to see him slip something off his shoulder. "Now think about what you've done."

He closed the doors of the cage, turning to see everyone staring at him in shock. Fishlegs dropped the bucket he was still clutching. Hiccup tried not to look at Natalya, knowing that her raised eyebrow could crack him faster than a dragon egg at hatching time. The middle of the arena was not a good place to blurt out the trick that he had just used. "OK, so, are we done? Because I've got some things I need to... Yep, see you tomorrow!"

He bolted before Gobber or any of the other teens could pin him down and demand explanations. Ruffnut rounded on Natalya. "Did you know he could do stuff like that?"

Natalya was in a bad enough mood to be catty in her response. "I've always known that Hiccup could do amazing things, if people could get over the fact that he does them differently and let him experiment."

She followed in Hiccup's wake, resolving to go back and check the

Zippleback's cage for answers once everyone else was gone.

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><p>AN: Right, the chapter is up and I hope you enjoyed it._

Work is starting again, which may cut into my writing time, but it promise not to abandon this story. Also, I posted a one-shot for the Maleficent movie that came out recently. Go check it out if character introspect ions are your thing.

Thanks!

11. Chapter 11

Disclaimer: As usual, I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

A/N: Sorry about the wait. This would have been up sooner, but lack of time and wondering if people even cared about it dragged me down.

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><p>CHAPTER ELEVEN**

A smoked eel that the Zippleback was actually cowering away from.

Natalya wasn't sure how Hiccup had discovered that, but she could get it out of him later, since the twins showed up just as she closed the doors after removing the eel. "What are you doing?"

Natalya tried to keep calm. Unpredictable things scared her, and the twins were practically the walking definition of the word. "You'll think it's stupid."

Tuffnut rolled his eyes. "We think everything you do is stupid."

Natalya shrugged. "I was thinking that it was a good thing that Vikings don't tame dragons. Can you imagine the kind of explosions you'd get trying to train a Zippleback?"

As contrary as the twins were and with how much they loved explosions, that pretty much guaranteed the support of the twins when Natalya's plan of non-hostile dragons eventually bore fruit and

Hiccup could call for peace between them.

Though she wasn't expecting them to take to the idea with so much enthusiasm. "We should train dragons! That would be so cool!"

That was nothing short of a disaster waiting to happen. Natalya tried to think of something that wouldn't result in having a pair of char-grilled Thorstons on her hands. "Perhaps you should observe them first, find out what they eat, what sets them off and what calms them. After all, you can't ride a Zippleback if you're dead."

That, at least, gave them pause, even if they didn't give up on the idea entirely, and Natalya took the opportunity to make herself scarce. She had bigger problems to deal with, such as a Night Fury that wasn't going to stay hidden forever, and dragons to feed while getting her own work done and attending Dragon Training.

Maybe she could introduce the other dragons to Toothless. If he was discovered while neither Hiccup or Natalya was around, maybe they could support him out of there and to the valley.

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><p>It was a good thing her father had left his surplus leather for Hiccup to use (Hiccup was probably the only person on Berk currently in his good books), because most of that evening was spent making a saddle for Hiccup to use while riding Toothless.<p>

It worked, but then there was the problem of how to keep the tail-fin open. A long cord worked, but it was difficult to keep up the pressure while also keeping yourself in the saddle. Next was the idea of a shorter cord to attach Hiccup to the saddle, and tying the cord to his leg.

That worked only slightly better than holding the cord, though it did get them out of the hollow and crash landing in a field of grass that had the same effect on Toothless as catnip had on felines. Natalya and Hiccup exchanged a look, watching Toothless and Skyfire croon and wriggle in the grass.

A way to subdue dragons without violence, just as they had hoped! Hiccup started gathering grass as Natalya marked the field on Hiccup's map. When the raids started up again, this would be very useful.

* * *

><p>They tested it out in Dragon Training a few hours later, to great success.<p>

The twins were still badgering Natalya about training Zipplebacks, since she had read the Book of Dragons at least as many times as Fishlegs, but could answer questions with far less rambling. Besides, Fishlegs was partnered with Astrid for the day.

Natalya was supposed to be partnered with Snotlout, but distraction by the twins had allowed Hiccup's cousin to seize his (presumed) chance for glory.

It failed, since the Gronkle they were facing simply rammed the boy,

throwing him halfway across the arena, before turning its attention to Hiccup.

Hiccup gulped, but raised the bunch of grass, holding his ground. The Gronkle took one whiff and rolled right over, much to everyone else's amazement. Even Gothi, the village elder, looked surprised and puzzled.

Unlike most times that Hiccup left people staring in shock, however, this time the reaction was positive. They had barely left the arena before the rest of the trainees (minus Astrid, who was hanging back and looking grumpy) crowded around them. "That was amazing!"

"I have never seen a Gronkle do that before!"

"Do you think it would work on a Zippleback?"

Wow, the twins really were determined. Hiccup looked trapped, definitely not used to this kind of reaction. "Oh... Ah, I left my axe back at the ring... You guys go on ahead... See you later, Natalya!"

He bolted, and after a moment of silence, Snotlout leaned over to her. "So, do you know how Hiccup did that?"

Natalya deliberately stepped away. "Yes."

There was another pause, this time broken by Fishlegs. "Can you show us?"

Natalya had fallen for that trick before, when she was younger and still desperate for acceptance. She folded her arms. "If you can prove that this whole being nice thing isn't a once-off bid to get information, sure. But neither of us are stupid enough to fall for false friendship a second time."

This pause was longer, and practically reeked of awkwardness, as it began to sink in that a lifetime of making the pair feel unwanted might actually have consequences.

Natalya uncrossed her arms, spotting a thundercloud sinking into the nearby trees. "Think about it, I have other things to do."

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><p>After the days baking, which took long enough for people to visit, attempt to question her and get sent away again, Natalya found Skyfire and raced for the valley.<p>

The dragons had already gone on the daily hunting and fishing trip, though the net was going to need repairs. It was a good thing they had a spare, and supplies to mend the damaged one. Choosing a good vantage point, Natalya settled down with the net in her lap and a terror on her shoulder.

She was about halfway through when Hiccup and a Toothless came in for a very rough landing.

Natalya leaned to the side to avoid a spray of dirt, but didn't look up, not wanting to lose track of the pattern. "How is the flying

practice going? Skyfire, stop that."

Her dragons huff of indignation as she stopped growling at a Nadder (who was showing interest in Toothless) was comically similar to Hiccup's expression as he brushed himself off. "It's coming slowly, but improving. I need a way to control the position of the tailfin, since holding it or attaching it to my leg hasn't worked so far."

Natalya smiled. "I can't really help you there, sorry. Oh, and you might want to brace yourself to be swamped when the rest of the village sees you again."

Hiccup pulled a face. "Part of me wonders if this will blow up in our faces when we tell the village that it was all tricks, but if we have proof that dragons can be trained or stopped without killing them..."

Natalya shrugged, "We already knew that there would always be a few who are against change just because it's change, but if it means less raiding and fewer deaths, I think most of the village will get behind it. Personally, I'm fully behind anything that promotes the use of brainpower over just smashing things."

Hiccup smiled at her thankfully And in complete agreement on the use of brains over brawn. "You think they will go for it?"

Natalya laughed. "The twins are already trying to pin you down to ask for help in taming a Zippleback. All I had to do was mention the potential for explosions. Snotlout will go for anything to make him look big and impressive, no matter how ill-advised. We will be fine."

They sat in silence for a moment, before Hiccup suddenly brightened. "Oh! Look what I discovered today. Toothless, scratches!"

Natalya smiled fondly as Toothless purred and wriggled when Hiccup began scratching him like he was playing with a puppy. Her jaw dropped when Toothless collapsed bonelessly, eyes closed, when Hiccup touched what was clearly a pressure point under the dragon's chin.

Hiccup turned to look at her, smiling proudly, which turned to a look of dismay as he was nearly flattened by a young Nightmare who also wanted scratches. Natalya giggled as she tried the technique on Skyfire, with the same effect. "That's perfect! Another tactic for the arena, that doesn't involve actual harm!"

Hiccup managed to dodge a Nadder who flew up, wanting attention, "And more people who will be impressed enough to listen when we talk about training dragons instead of killing them."

* * *

><p>They were right, too.<p>

The next day was the Nadder again, and it was in a spectacularly bad mood.

Natalya managed to get on the Nadder's back again, diverting it away

from Snotlout and the twins. She even managed to get it into the air for a few minutes, though the acrobatics it could perform in the arena were limited.

The joy of flight filled her for a few brief moments, before Gobber yelled at her to stop fooling around.

Sulking, she jumped off again, retreating toward the twins as the Nadder dodged Astrid's axe and charged toward Hiccup, who was holding a mace after his axe had been reduced to cinders the last time they dealt with this particular dragon.

Hiccup jumped into the Nadder's blind spot for a moment, long enough for the birdlike dragon to lower its head within reach. He was just in time, if the battle cry from Astrid, on the other side of the arena was anything to go by. Hastily, Hiccup scratched the Nadder's chin. The pressure point was located a few inches off, probably due to the difference in head-shape, but it worked just the same.

The Nadder dropped, and Natalya had to giggle at the expression on her cousin's face as Astrid skidded to a halt, axe still raised, staring at Hiccup in amazement.

Natalya took advantage of the stunned silence. "I know it sounds weird, but flying that dragon was kind of fun. It felt like I could go anywhere or fight anything."

Snotlout blinked. "Well, riding something that breathes fire is definitely an advantage you'd need."

The amount of support in the predictably insulting statement was unexpected, though Fishlegs spouting logistics was not. "You'd need to chart a course with plenty of resting spots and food sources, though. Dragons can't sail non-stop like ships can."

Ruffnut chipped in, "Ships can't smash things or breathe fire, though."

Her twin backed her up, "And dragons are faster."

"WHY ARE YOU EVEN TALKING ABOUT THIS?" All of the teens jumped as Gobber's voice boomed out from behind them. "LESSON IS OVER, GO STUDY UP!"

The teens scattered.

* * *

><p>They had expected that the rest of the Dragon Trainees would keep up the questions over dinner, when Gobber wasn't around and Hiccup and Natalya couldn't run away.<p>

They hadn't expected to have every occupant of the Mead Hall crowding around only seconds after they sat down, asking how Hiccup had taken down the Nadder, what made Natalya think of trying to ride a dragon, was it just the Nadder or would the same thing work with other dragons?

The two teens exchanged a look and tried not to swear.

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><p>AN: so, next chapter is up, and I'll try not to take so long with the next one._

If you liked it, if you thought it had problems, if you have questions, let me know in a review!

12. Chapter 12

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters. The new story art is by my friend Lucy, who is twenty different kinds of awesome.

Summary: See previous chapters.

A/N: Last chance to vote for pairings.

* * *

><p>Chapter Twelve

Hiccup and Natalya took turns alternating between eating dinner and answering questions.

Apparently, there was a pressure point that would knock dragons out without killing them, and they didn't know if it would work on other dragons (neither of them was about to mention Toothless). Flying was indescribable to anyone who hadn't tried it themselves and if she got the chance, Natalya had every intention of trying it again. (She wasn't about to mention that her chance would happen the very next morning, either.)

Finally, they managed to escape the main crowd and hide at Natalya's hall. Hiccup flopped down onto a bench. "That was surprisingly exhausting." He glanced up at Natalya, who was pulling out bowls and opened the back door to admit Skyfire, the Terrible Terror who used her oven as a kind of nest, and half of a wild boar. "It was good to see that so many of them were open to the idea of riding dragons, though."

Natalya began to mix dough, indicating the boar. "Skin that for me, could you? What do you think our next step should be? Crash, stop that!"

The last sentence was addressed to a Terror, who was chasing the firelight reflecting off Natalya's charms and the knife that Hiccup was using to skin and joint the boar. Hiccup held up a hand. "No, no, wait. Let me see if the light chasing works on Toothless as well, otherwise the metal boss on the shields will work when we get to the Terrors in training."

Natalya considered the idea. "Harder to pull off as a tactic in a night-time raid, though. Still, it's an idea to try. Should we keep trying to persuade the other Vikings to give peaceful methods a try?"

Hiccup nodded, placing a skinned and de-boned leg on the table. "We'll try to make sure they bring it up first, and maybe stick to the children and other trainees, for now. Maybe a few of the adults, if they seem interested."

Natalya laughed, beginning to cut the meat into manageable pieces before wrapping it up and placing it in the Coldroom. "After what happened in the Mead Hall tonight, that's actually a real possibility. We'll play it by ear and hope for the best."

Hiccup nodded, silently finishing the boar and offering the skin to Skyfire, who gobbled it down. Natalya looked up from her chopping, noticing the troubled look on his face. "All right, what is it?"

Hiccup gave a rueful half-smile, grateful that if he had to be caught by someone, at least it was someone who would never mock him. "Have you ever thought you knew someone, and turned out to be really, really wrong?"

Natalya shrugged. She had originally thought the Bog Burglar heir to be a silly chatterbox, and had very quickly been proven wrong. Well, half wrong; Cami could talk the hind leg of a donkey. "Camicaze, but that's ancient history now. Why?"

Hiccup sighed. "Well, I always thought that Astrid was kind of the perfect girl. You know: smart, tough, good in a fight, beautifulâ€¦ but ever since we started training, especially since we started being good at it, I've discovered a side of her that isn't so attractive."

The side of Astrid that Natalya had more experience with. "You mean the competitive side that can't stand someone else being better than her, but gets angry when they don't reach her standards of acceptable skill?"

Hiccup nodded, realizing that Natalya, as Astrid's maternal cousin, may have known this side existed, but kept silent because she didn't want to disappoint him. The insults when he wasn't good enough, the anger and jealousy when he was, the temper that was so easily set off, the refusal to listen to anyone else's point of view, the lack of consideration for othersâ€¦ and, when Hiccup put his mind to it, he struggled to find anything they had in common.

Even worse was the glaring contrast between the cousins that he was noticing more and more. Natalya was gentle, patient, considerate, and shared his passion for dragons and desire for peace, to find a way that didn't involve the constant cycle of fighting and killingâ€¦ and she was his best (only) friend. They were misfits together, and he couldn't stand to lose that friendship if it turned out she didn't feel the same way, or if his father refused to let them marry, as was very likely.

Sometimes, Hiccup wondered if he had done something horrible to

offend the gods without knowing it, or if the Norns just had it out for him for kicks and giggles.

He shook the thought off as Natalya placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "That, and a lot more, and wondering, in the very unlikely event that she did agree to date me, if we would have anything to even talk about, and what kind of a relationship it would be if she only ever looked at me with contempt."

Natalya smiled gently. "If we could command our hearts where to love, the world would be a far simpler place, I think. You don't need to decide anything now, so just think on it. Perhaps Astrid is just trying to prove herself, same as the rest of us. For now, we have other things to focus on."

Like seeing if the light trick worked on other dragons, and practicing flying with Toothless, which was getting better every day. Hiccup hugged his friend goodnight "gaining a reminder of another difference between Natalya and Astrid" and headed back to the Chief's Hall.

* * *

><p>As it turned out, Toothless was just as entranced by the moving light as the Terrible Terror. So were the other dragons, though Hiccup and Natalya had to stop after a Nightmare and a Zippleback both went for the light at the same time, and nearly flattened several younger dragons.<p>

On the bright side, it helped the more easily-distracted dragons with hunting. Just angle a dagger so the light shone where you wanted the dragon to dive, and hold on tight. The prey might wind up a bit squished, but that wasn't the worst possible outcome.

The two humans exchanged crafty smiles before mounting Skyfire and returning to the village for training.

* * *

><p>It only took a few moments for work out where best to position themselves to use the light trick, and they had even managed to beat the other teens to the arena by a full minute. Luckily, there was no time for Astrid to do more than narrow her eyes before Gobber appeared and opened a cage. "Meet the Terrible Terror!"<p>

It was obvious that most of the teens had been expecting something a lot more impressive. Tuffnut actually laughed, gesturing at the tiny dragon. "Ha, it's like the size of my " _argh! Get it off!"_

The Terror pounced, knocking Tuffnut flat and attaching itself to his nose. Fishlegs, Ruffnut, Astrid and Snotlout scrambled out of the way. Natalya leaned on her poleaxe casually, trying to hide her amusement, "Bigger than that, I imagine, and rather more impressive."

A few feet away, Ruffnut actually laughed. Tuffnut managed to glare at both of him as the Terror leaped off him, chasing a speck of light. "Oh, I am hurt! I am very much hurt!"

Ruffnut cackled and shoved her twin back to the ground.

"Wimp!"

Hiccup advanced slowly, angling his shield to make the light move. From an uninformed point of view, it looked like the Terror was actually running away from him, and Natalya couldn't help but smile back at Hiccup as he looked back at the other teens.

Tuffnut managed to climb back to his feet and find his helmet. "Wow, he's better than you ever were."

Astrid's glare of black rage did her no favours, and suggested that she would be spending the afternoon throwing her axe at defenceless trees.

* * *

><p>Hiccup spent the afternoon feeling very pleased with himself, having finally hit upon a design that worked, after more adjustments and modifications that he cared to count.<p>

Flying in tandem with a dragon was something entirely new, something that neither Hiccup or Natalya had ever done before, and they had never had to make a new fin for a dragon before, either.

It was fascinating to change the position of the pedal, and the corresponding position of the tailfin, and see how it affected the dragon's flight. One position changed direction, folding the fins closed brought a dragon to land and another increased the speed.

That last discovery turned into a misadventure, since going faster broke the rope and sent both Hiccup and Toothless crashing through the trees, somehow hitting the attaching cord at exactly the right angle to jam it and leave him dangling off Toothless as the dragon picked himself up, but Hiccup didn't regret it. Natalya could look as fondly amused as she liked, and Hiccup didn't care. The joy he shared with Toothless at each new discovery was worth it.

Besides, Natalya wasn't the one who had to wait until after dark to sneak into the forge for tools to unjam the connecting ring.

As much as he cared about her, Natalya was hopeless with telling blacksmith tools apart, and Gobber would be at the forge until dinner. At least Natalya could keep everyone else distracted in the Mead Hall while Hiccup fixed the harness.

Thank Odin that Night Furies were almost invisible in the dark.

* * *

><p>After training the next day, the duo separated. Hiccup was finally going to fly Toothless properly, outside of controlled conditions, and Natalya would join them with Skyfire once she finished delivering her orders. Privately, Hiccup hoped it took a while, because Toothless always tried to show off when Skyfire was around.<p>

Natalya had just finished delivering her wares to the dockworkers when a longship limped into harbor, riding low due to both damage, and the number of Vikings crammed into it, which suggested that

something bad had happened to the other longships. Of course, they had been hunting for the dragon nest, so bad things happening was almost a given.

Extracting herself from a conversation â€" the downside of popularity was that people had developed an annoying habit of assuming that she wanted to talk to them _all the time â€" _Natalya drifted over to eavesdrop on Stoick and Gobber. The blacksmith at least tried to sound cheerful, "Did you find the nest?"

Stoick, who had spent the past few days trying to stop a shipful of Vikings from killing each other out of frustration or boredom, didn't bother to put a good face on things. "Not even close. I hope you had more success than we did."

Gobber considered the statement. In the sense that the teens were fierce, skilled fighters thirsting for dragon blood: no. In the sense that Hiccup was no longer considered a useless failure: yes. "Well, if by success you mean that your parenting troubles are over with, then, yes."

Stoick stopped, looking faintly alarmed as several villagers came running down to greet their family members, shouting the good news to the chief as they passed. "Congratulations, Stoick! Everyone is so relieved!"

"Out with the old and in with the new, right?"

"No one will miss that old nuisance!"

"The village is throwing a party to celebrate!"

The alarm on the chief's face turned to panic, knowing that only one person on Berk could cause that kind of reaction. He had known that Dragon Training was a horrible idea! What had happened to Hiccup? Stoick found himself hoping that his only child had simply managed to get himself lost in the woods. "He's gone?"

Gobber shrugged. "Yes, most afternoons, but who can blame him? The life of a celebrity is very rough. He can barely walk through the village without being swarmed by his new fans, him and Natalya both."

Stoick felt like the sun had decided to rise in the west for no particular reason. His son, a celebrity? When all it took to get even the most stubborn Viking to do something was threatening them with an afternoon of babysitting? He placed a hand on Gobber's shoulder, turning his old friend around to face him. "Hiccup?"

Gobber actually smiled, spotting the other surprising development making her way up the hill with a smile on her face. "Who would have thought it, eh? He has this way with the beasts."

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><p>AN: Sorry for the wait, and for ending it there. Between writing, organising, acting in and directing a Children's Play, research and documentation for two competitions and a class on medieval hairstyles, writing has taken a back-seat. On the bright side, the kids had a blast as a torch-wielding mob, and it was hilarious to watch a three-year-old poking their parents with cardboard-crete-paper torches after the play finished and saying 'Burn, burn'._

_I'm off to New Zealand for a week, and work starts two days after I get home (yay for the Australia Day public holiday), so I'm not sure when the next chapter will be, but you can check out the various other stories while you wait__**. 'A SCA Girl in Middle Earth', 'Cinderella Grows A Spine'**__ and __**'Striking Back'**__ have been updated, as has the Battle of Five Armies chapter of __**'Not What You Expected'**__._

13. Chapter 13

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters

Summary: See Previous Chapters

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><p>Chapter Twelve

Riding Toothless properly for the first time was both like nothing he had imagined and everything he had dreamed.

Hiccup had spent hours memorising the tail positions and what they did before the test flight. He had originally planned to attach it to the saddle and work off that, but Natalya had disagreed, emphasising the importance of working as one and taking your cues from each other.

Having witnessed the perfect partnership between girl and dragon, so completely in tune with each other, Hiccup knew that he could settle for nothing less.

They started slowly, circling around the Dragon Valley, then over the woods, and finally to the stacks out to sea on the far side of Berk. They had experimented before while working on the saddle and tailfin, but this was the first time they had flown such a distance alone, without Natalya or another dragon nearby in case something went wrong.

They began with a glide, soaring under a row of linked rock columns that had probably once been a kind of land-bridge, Hiccup constantly glancing back to check that the tailfin was in the correct position.

That led to a lot of wobbling, as the shift in his weight sent the wrong signal to Toothless, but they made it through the pillars without incident. Relieved, Hiccup guided Toothless up into the sky,

higher and higher, above the rocks, above the clouds, above everything.

He could feel the sheer joy that radiated from Toothless as the Nightfury relished the joy of flying properly again, and for a moment, the dragon's happiness was all that mattered to Hiccup.

But it was a moment too long, because Toothless slowed for a fraction of a second, and the line that connected Hiccup to the saddle lifted off its hook. For a second that seemed to last for eternity, Hiccup hung weightless in the air, then started to plummet back down. Riderless, Toothless could no longer control the tailfin, and fell alongside the young Viking.

Hiccup forced himself to think through the panic that engulfed both of them. First, he needed to get back in the saddle and angle the tailfin to slow their fall. "Toothless, you have to kind of angle yourselfâ€¦" that sent Toothless into a kind of spiral, nearly braining Hiccup with his tail. "OK, no, no, no, try to come back towards me!"

By some Thor-blessed miracle, Hiccup managed to grab hold of the saddle, dragging himself close enough to hook the line back into place and get his foot on the pedal. Toothless fanned his wings out, rearing to slow their fall, but they were still moving too fast, the sea and the stacks coming up to meet them at what would be a deadly speed.

There was no time to think, no chance to plan a strategy. Only Hiccup, and Toothless, and the rocks and sea that loomed ever closer. He closed his eyes, blocking out everything except Toothless. His foot moved, the tailfin locking into position, and Toothless swerved around the first rock pillar. Hiccup's eyes snapped open, and he didn't even think as he adjusted the position for the next turn, smoothly veering around obstacles and gaining speed.

A shadow fell over them, and he looked up, foot automatically adjusting to the way Toothless moved. A mass of purple-grey soared through the sky, accompanied by the sound of gleeful laughter, performing all kinds of acrobatics. Not for the first time, Natalya took his breath away. She seemed happy, rather than worried, so hopefully she had missed the earlier blunder that had turned into a near-death experience.

Hiccup and Toothless emerged from the sea stacks, spiralling up to join Natalya and Skyfire. His best friend's smile was radiant, her eyes shining with pride. Toothless seemed to feel the same, letting out a blast of blue fire as Hiccup whooped with joy.

Natalya's laughter turned into a yelp as Skyfire brought her wings up to protect her rider from the flames. Toothless went into a sudden barrel-roll, likewise wrapping his wings to shield Hiccup from the worst of the heat, and they flew on.

* * *

><p>Hiccup felt as though they could chase the sinking sun beyond the horizon, never needing to care what anyone thought of them, but eventually the two dragon riders turned back.<p>

They checked Natalya's nets, collecting several fish for the two dragons before the Terrors came to collect the rest of the day's catch for Dragon Valley, and settled on a rocky outcrop. Natalya pulled a freshly-baked loaf from her bag, along with a small jar of preserves, tearing the bread in two and passing him half. "Your father and the other Vikings returned from the raid an hour or two ago. They lost a ship and the two that came back aren't in great condition, though. Your dad didn't seem to happy at first, but then Gobbler started raving about how well you are doing in Dragon Training."

As always, her tone was neutral, waiting for his reaction before displaying a definitive emotion. Some would view that as almost servile, but Hiccup appreciated that she considered other people's feelings, as much as a tactic of self-preservation as genuinely not wanting to upset someone. But Hiccup didn't know how to react. Should he be pleased that his father might finally be proud of him? Nervous that this raised the stakes of being discovered even higher? Hopeful that his father might actually listen to him?

Finally, he tried for humour, as several wild Terrors flew over to try and scavenge something from Toothless, only for Toothless to aim a tiny flame at one, which staggered away. Hiccup passed it an uncooked fish. "Not so fireproof on the inside, I see. So, any ideas on how to tell the village that everything they think they know about these guys is wrong?"

Natalya laughed at his grim joke, the effect he had been aiming for. "Well, there's the possibility of winning the 'honour' of facing the Monstrous Nightmare and taming it in front of the entire village, but that leaves the possibility of someone trying to interfere."

And that would be nothing short of disastrous. Nightmares were temperamental on the best of days. "Let's leave that as a last resort. Maybe if we could show some visible benefit..."

Hiccup trailed off with a shrug, mirrored by his best friend. That would require the Vikings to sit and listen long enough for a demonstration, rather than instantly attacking not only the dragons, but possibly also their riders.

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><p>Silently, they returned to the forest near Dragon Valley, leaving the two dragons and continuing back to the Village on foot. Hiccup stuck around to help Natalya prepare the meat for a few batches of pies, then left for the forge. He couldn't avoid his father forever, but he needed to think of an explanation that didn't involve revealing Toothless.<p>

He was no closer to a solution when his father finally did find him, still slouched over his desk and absently rolling a burnt stick back and forth. His father's face was expressionless, and Hiccup suddenly realised that the table was covered with drawings of Toothless and designs for the tailfin and saddle. He leaped up, trying to hide the sketches behind his thin frame. "Dad, you're back! Uh, Gobber's not here, so â€" "

Stoick had to wriggle a bit to get his bulk through the opening into Hiccup's little workshop, but he managed. "I know. I came looking for

you, son."

That was a first. As far back as Hiccup could remember, his father only sought him out to make sure he wasn't causing trouble. "You did?"

Stoick moved slowly forward, his voice calm and soft. "You've been keeping secrets."

Stoick was the sort of person who bounced from one emotion to another, and his 'calm' was usually the lull before the storm. Hiccup tried not to squeak. "Uh, secrets, what secrets? Umâ€¦"

Why did his father have to pick _now_ to suddenly become perceptive? "Just how long did you think you could hide it from me?"

Hiccup managed to shuffle the paper behind him so that most of them were blank side up. "Um, I, uh, I don't know what you'reâ€¦"

Now there was a hint of emotion that Hiccup couldn't immediately place. "Nothing happens on this island without me knowing about it. So, let's talk about that dragon."

When in doubt, Hiccup tended to assume the worst, and immediately started stammering an explanation. "Oh, Gods. Dad, I'm so sorry. I was going to tell you, but it wasn't just my secret, and I didn't know how to, uhâ€¦"

He trailed off in confusion as he realised that his father was laughing, his face delighted. "Er, you're not mad?"

Stoick sat down on a small stool. "Mad? I was hoping for this!"

Yep, definite confusion. Maybe his dad had been hit in the head during the hunt for the nest? "Uh, you were?"

He had never seen his father this happy. Ever. "Ah, and believe me, it only gets better! Just wait until you spill a Nadder's guts for the first time, or mount your first Gronkle head on a spear! What a feeling!"

Oh. Hiccup wasn't sure if it was his father's clap on the back or his own dawning comprehension that made him fall back against a shelf, but Stoick didn't notice. "You really had me going there, son! All those years of being the worst Viking Berk had ever seen! Odin, it was rough, I almost gave up on you, and all the while you were holding out on me! Oh, Thor almighty! With you doing so well in the ring, we finally have something to talk about."

Hiccup's face fell further and further as he realised that Stoick hadn't figured out the truth, only the deception that had engulfed the entire village. He knew that he hadn't exactly been a credit to his father's name, but to hear that his only parent had almost given up on him... that hurt.

Before he could say anything, Stoick brought something out from behind his back. A proper Viking Helmet. "Oh, I brought you something to keep you safe in the ring."

It was a show of trust, of faith in him. A small, hesitant smile made its way onto Hiccup's face as he examined it. "Thanks."

A matching smile shone from behind his father's beard. Hiccup knew that raising him hadn't been easy, and his father had struggled but done his best. Perhaps it was just as hard for his father to express his feelings as it was for Hiccup. There was a hint of regret in his father's eyes, too. "Your mother would have wanted you to have it."

Mom? His father almost never spoke of the mother who had been carried off by dragons when he was a baby. Was that why his father was so obsessed with finding the nest? A desperate hope that maybe his mother had survived somehow, or a desire to avenge her? The pride at having something of his mother's abruptly vanished, replaced by mortification as his father finished the statement, tapping his own helmet. "It's half of her breastplate. Matching set. Keeps her close, you know."

There was nothing Hiccup could think of to say to that, but there was something for them to talk about. "Er, Dad, about the dragons..."

Hiccup trailed off. This was the perfect chance to tell his father everything. How dragons were as much victims of a single dragon's greed and cruelty as the Vikings were. How a peaceful co-existence was possible, and the benefits of working with dragons instead of killing them. How Stoick's son had accomplished something that no Viking had ever achieved in the history of the world (Natalya considered herself more a permanent fixture of Johan's trading business than a Viking of Berk) in the history of the world.

But for the first time that Hiccup could remember, his father was proud of him, and Hiccup couldn't bring himself to destroy the pleased, hopeful look at the possibility of having a topic they could both relate to.

How could he turn around and say that the best part of Dragon Training had been the opportunity to further his knowledge of dragons and find new ways to train them? Claim that he didn't care what the rest of the village thought about him anymore? He couldn't admit that his success had been motivated almost entirely by Toothless (and slightly because of how much it infuriated Astrid). Even if Stoick's pride in him was only because of a trick that had fooled the entire village, Hiccup couldn't bear to give up the warm, happy feeling it gave him just yet. "Well, I've been studying the dragons, and I discovered some things. Natalya found out that it's possible to ride them, when she dodged Astrid's ax-throw and had to jump on the Nadder's back. Did you know that they're terrified of eels? And there's a weak point that knocks them out cold, if you can get to itâ€¦"

He didn't know if his father had heard all of this from the other Vikings yet, but it was a way to prolong the pride in his father's expression, and it wasn't exactly harmful knowledge. Natalya would be disappointed that he hadn't managed to tell his father the truth, and he didn't like being the cause of that, but they could work out a plan that would reveal the dragons to the other Vikings at a later date.

For now, for just a little while longer, he wanted to bask in his father's good opinion, before he risked losing it forever.

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><p>AN: So, the next chapter is up, and I hope you all enjoy it. I had planned to make it longer, but this was a better stopping point._

_This scene, I think, was a big turning point for Hiccup, especially when he has the brief hope that Stoick knows the truth and is proud anyway, only for it to be crushed when he realises that Stoick is happy because he thinks Hiccup is on his way to being a dragon-killer. Hearing that his only family almost gave up on him had to have been rough, too. _

I originally planned for Hiccup to say something positive about dragons, but decided it would make a bigger impact and highlight the conflict if I had him back down in favour of letting Stoick be proud for as long as possible. Don't worry, the Big Reveal will be EPIC.

_On an unrelated note, I have somehow been suckered in to seeing the Fifty Shades movie, which I am not happy about, but the tickets are already bought, so I can't say no. I'll just have to console myself by making snarky remarks under my breath the whole time. My one-shot '___**Right Before My Eyes' **___should express my opinion of That Series well enough._

As always, Constructive Criticism is appreciated, but random insults are not.

14. Chapter 14

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters. Changes to the plot are mine.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

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><p>Chapter Fourteen

Hiccup woke up to the smell of cooking, rather than trying to judge if he had time to beg a snack off Natalya that he could eat on the way to Dragon Valley.

Quickly dressing and running downstairs, he found his father stirring a pot. That was a surprise; before Hiccup had learned to cook for himself, Gobber had brought dinner over to eat with them, or they had

lived off food that could be eaten cold. When Natalya opened her shop and was considered independent of the Hoffersons, she had worked out a deal where she paid her tax partially in food (and a discount on goods from Johan) rather than only in coin.

Stoick looked up at his son's entrance, ladling porridge into a bowl and holding it out to Hiccup. He took it hesitantly, reaching for the jar of sauce made from some fruit that Johan had brought back from his travels, and which Natalya was trying to cultivate from the seeds, with very limited success. It was tart, like the purple fruits themselves, but made a wonderful addition to the bland porridge. "I didn't know you could cook, Dad."

His father chuckled slightly. "Not much, but it was better than letting your mother in the kitchen. You could fire her meatballs from a catapult, and not be able to tell the difference."

Hiccup blinked again. He was learning more about his mother in a few days than he had in a lifetime. He decided not to test a good thing. "Do you know how much longer we have until the final fight of Dragon Training?"

Stoick visibly pulled himself out of his memories. "I think today is the deciding round, and then whoever Gothi picks will face the Monstrous Nightmare tomorrow. I know you'll make me proud, son."

Guilt gnawed in Hiccup's stomach once more, even though he knew he had nothing to be ashamed of. Thor, Odin, Frey, even Loki, please let this whole mess turn out all right in the end.

Quickly finishing his breakfast, Hiccup stood up. "I promised Natalya that we'd go over a strategy before training. I guess I'll see you in the ring?"

Actually, Hiccup hoped that Stoick would be too busy catching up on the things that had happened in his absence to observe Dragon Training, but no such luck. "Of course, son. I wouldn't miss it."

Hiccup tried to smile, and bolted.

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><p>Natalya wasn't thrilled, as Hiccup had predicted, but she did try to understand it from Hiccup's point of view. Natalya had struggled for acceptance, too, after all, even if she had been lucky enough to have a parent who valued her for who she was, not who he wanted her to be.<p>

Both of them were quiet, thinking hard as Natalya prepared the day's baking and put it in the oven, shooing Toothless and Skyfire out the back door, then quickly washed up. Finally, she spoke, "Have you thought about what we should do for today and the final exam?"

Hiccup shook his head, eternally grateful that Natalya's hall backed out into the forest. "I've thought about it almost non-stop, but I still don't have any idea what to do. There are arguments for both sides, after all."

Natalya nodded ruefully. "We've done so well that people will be suspicious if we fail now, but winning means being expected to kill a dragon, which I will not do."

Hiccup agreed. "But if one of the other recruits wins, not only will they be happy to try and kill a dragon, but they'll probably be at least badly injured doing so."

Both of them ruthlessly squashed down the brief glee at their tormentors getting a taste of their own medicine, but neither of the dragon riders actually wanted the other teens to die. Natalya sighed in resignation, "On the other hand, if one of us wins, perhaps we can use the opportunity to show the village that dragons don't have to be feared."

Hiccup frowned. It was a long shot, but it had possibilities. "A Nightmare isn't exactly where I'd want to start with that, but it could work."

Natalya conceded the point, and changed the subject. "I asked Gobber about the final exam. What form it would take, I mean. He says we're going to work our way through the dragons, starting with the Terrible Terror and working our way up to the Gronkle."

Hiccup grimaced, having hoped to just 'fight' one dragon and get it over with. "Wonderful. And with my dad watching the entire time, so proud of the Viking I'm pretending to be. I'm doomed."

Natalya laughed, trying to find a bright point as she screwed up her courage and brushed a light kiss on his cheek. "Only if you get too close to Astrid. Ruffnut says she's been throwing axes at trees in her spare time, and her frustration at not being the best anymore has to be through the roof right now."

Great, another reason to be nervous, on top of the fact that his best friend had just kissed him and he had no idea what to do about it.. "Oh, that's going to be a€" "

"GREAT, HICCUP!"

They were interrupted by the other trainees surrounding them. Snotlout threw an arm over his cousin's shoulders, not quite hiding his nervousness. Uncle Spitelout, Hiccup's mother's brother, had probably had words with him again about 'upholding the family pride', 'Jorgensons are the best', etc. Snotlout hated the idea of being a disappointment, at least as much as Hiccup hated the reality. "Got any tips for the rest of us, today?"

Natalya regained her balance from where Snotlout's meaty arm had accidentally pushed her out of the way. "Have a plan of attack, rather than just charging in?"

Hiccup was a bit less sarcastic as he leaned away from Ruffnut, who was batting her eyes at him. "Erâ€| try to work together, instead of attacking separately and getting in each other's way? That's what caused most of the problems in training."

The twins stared at her. "Work together? That's insane!"

Fishlegs shrugged. "Maybe, but it's worked for Natalya and Hiccup so far. Besides, this is our last chance to impress everyone, so we might as well try it."

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><p>Amazingly, Fishlegs and the twins managed to work together long enough to subdue the Zippleback. Natalya had been up half an hour before dawn to braid her long hair with dragon-nip, which took out the Terrible Terror once Hiccup distracted it with something shiny and Natalya pretended to wrestle with it. The Nadder was worn down by Astrid, glaring so fiercely at the other trainees that they mostly left her to it, and defeated by Snotlout and Fishlegs body-slamming the Nadder as Astrid knocked it out.<p>

The Gronkle, despite its slow movement, was proving the most resilient to deal with, largely because it was playing defence, dodging and avoiding the young Vikings, rather than attacking them as the other dragons had.

Ducking behind a barrier to catch his breath and nearly landing on top of his best friend, Hiccup glanced at Natalya. "Have you been training the Gronkle behind our back? It fights like you."

Natalya rolled her eyes at him. "No, but we fought the Gronkle in training more than any of the other dragons, and the breed is known to be lazy and lethargic, not stupid. Perhaps it learned from the experience."

That was a possibility that Hiccup would love to explore further at a later date, but Natalya launched herself back into the fray, a piece of dragon-nip falling out of her hair. Hiccup picked it up as his friend was replaced swiftly by Astrid, who glared and shoved him down, gripping her axe. "Stay out of my way, I'm winning this thing."

The glint in her eye was dangerous, and it wasn't just his reluctance to hurt a dragon that made Hiccup call after her. "Good! Please, by all means, go ahead!"

He looked up at the crowd, where his father was watching proudly, and made a half-hearted salute, before turning back to the fight. He didn't have much time before Astrid pulled herself together and attacked the Gronkle. After watching her nearly take out the Nadder single-handedly, Hiccup didn't like the odds for the unfortunate Gronkle.

Hiccup imitated the roar that Natalya used whenever Gronkle babies got too rowdy (though he theorised that it was the tone more than the roar that got their attention), hoping that it worked on adult Gronkles as well as baby ones. The dragon came flying toward him as he heard Astrid yell a war-cry, and Hiccup held out the dragon-nip, hoping that his body concealed what he was actually doing.

The Gronkle rolled over just as Astrid came charging over the last barrier, screaming and holding her axe high, freezing in place as Hiccup tried to assume a normal pose. Astrid didn't stay frozen for long, slashing her axe at thin air, her face a mask of rage. "No! Son of a half-troll, rat-eating, muck-bucketâ€¦!"

She probably would have continued, and Hiccup felt it best to get out of the enraged blonde's way. A flight with Natalya (who was trying to separate a scuffle between Snotlot and the twins) would do wonders for his mental state. Unfortunately, Gobber got hold of him before he could slip away. "Come on, I'm late forâ€¦"

He stopped as Astrid shoved her axe under his chin "WHAT? Late for what, exactly?"

Natalya spotted his dilemma and started to come over, but to his great relief, Hiccup's father intervened. "OK, everybody quiet down! The Elder has decided!"

Er, perhaps not such a relief after all, then. At least Gothi wouldn't be making any long speeches. Gobber held his hook over Astrid's head, to which Gothi slowly shook her head. Gobber used his hand to point to Hiccup, and Gothi smiled and indicated, sealing Hiccup's doom to a chorus of resounding cheers.

If looks could kill, the glare Astrid was aiming at him would have had Hiccup knocking at the door to Freya's Hall, but luckily she was cut off by the other teens swarming around as Gobber tossed him into the air, looking prouder than anyone had ever seen him. "You've done it, Hiccup! You've done it! You get to kill the dragon!"

As though that was somehow a good thing. Hiccup tried to muster at least a pretence of enthusiasm, helped by his father's loud cheering, as Natalya slipped out of the arena. "Yes, that's great, awesome, I am soâ€¦"

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><p>"â€¦Dead. We're doomed."<p>

Hiccup was muttering to himself as he wandered through the woods, carrying a basket of fish. "Maybe a long vactationâ€¦ very longâ€¦ like, forever. But then Dad would be disappointed. But I can't keep going like this, or Astrid will-"

A cold voice interrupted him. "Yes? Astrid will what?"

Speak of the demonâ€¦ "Astrid! What theâ€¦ er, what are you doing here."

Astrid was sharpening her axe, the calm before the storm that may or may not end with Hiccup dead on the forest floor. "I wanna know what's going on."

Oh, Loki's ballsâ€¦ They were only minutes away from Dragon Valley, and dragons had very good hearing. Toothless was on this side of the gorge, and Natalya would soon be wondering what was taking him so long. He needed to get Astrid away, fast, or their secret would be blown in seconds.

Hiccup tried to subtly back up, away from Dragon Valley, Astrid prowling after him. "No-one just gets as good as you did, _especially you! Start talking! Are you training with someone?"

In a sense, that was close, but Hiccup didn't think that Astrid would consider Toothless a 'trainer'. There was a flicker of something in

the trees behind Astrid, and Hiccup's urgency increased. "Er, trainingâ€¦ umâ€¦"

Astrid grabbed him by the harness, looking steadily more murderous with each passing second. "It had better not involve _thisâ€¦_"

This was not going to end well. "Er, I know this looks really bad, but, uh, this is â€œ OW!"

A twig snapped nearby, causing Astrid to shove him to the ground as she gripped her axe tighter and looked around wildly. Hiccup sprang to his feet. "You're right, I'm through with the lies. I've been making outfits. So, you found me out, take me inâ€¦ OW, why would you do that?"

She twisted his arm, hard enough to nearly cause a fracture, and kicked the side of his knee, dropping him to the ground again. "That's for the lies! And _that's â€œ_" she positioned her axe over his middle and dropped it, impacting hard. " â€œ for everything else."

Hiccup just groaned, in both pain and frustration, struggling back to his feet as he heard Toothless growl. "Oh, no."

Astrid gasped and tackled him to the ground, which Hiccup was getting kind of tired of. He hoped that Natalya had some bruise-balm left over from her last trade with Gothi. It was the worst thing Astrid could have done, as Toothless assumed that she was attacking Hiccup and let out a furious roar as he bounded forward.

Astrid gaped for a split second, then rolled to her feet, white with terror. "Run! Run! AHHH!"

It was Hiccup's turn to tackle Astrid out of the way, throwing her axe out of reach as Toothless pounced. "No, no, Toothless! It's ok, she's a friend."

Well, not really, but dragons though of other beings in terms of 'friend' or 'enemy' or 'food', and as much as Hiccup didn't like Astrid right now, he didn't want her dead. Astrid stared in disbelief as Toothless backed down on nothing more than Hiccup's say-so. Hiccup knew that he needed to do major damage control. "It's all right. You just scared him."

Astrid's eyes were wider than Hiccup had ever seen them, her light dusting of freckles standing out in stark relief on her pale face, and a definite note of hysteria in her shrill voice. "_I_ scared _him_? Who is '_him_'?"

Yep, they were doomed. Hiccup glanced up, hoping to see a tell-tale storm cloud. "Astrid, this is Toothless. Toothless, Astrid."

Toothless growled, clearly not fond of the one who had dared to attack Hiccup. Astrid stared for a few seconds, then bolted. Hiccup resisted the urge to thump his head on a rock, jumping into Toothless's saddle and launching them into the air.

They had to get to Astrid before Astrid got to anyone else.

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><p>AN: OK, yeah, it's been a while._

_Various projects, both writing and non- have kept me very busy, and my computer has been having issues, while trying to post from my iPad causes formatting problems like you wouldn't believe. _

Anyway, I'll be hopping over the pond to Italy tonight, so don't expect me to post anything for at least two weeks. We'll see how things stand when I get back.

'_**A SCA Girl in Middle-Earth**_', '__**'Reintroduction'**__', '__**'War and Peace'**__ and '__**'Striking Back**__' have also been updated, along with a new "__50 Shades of Grey__" fanfic entitled__** 'The Sub-Club'.**_

Yeah, I know, I have got to stop having plot-bunny-spawning conversations with friends, even if they do have amusing ideas.

Thanks, and tell me what you think.

15. Chapter 15

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters. Credit goes to Dreamworks and Cressida Cowell

Summary: See Previous Chapters

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><p>Chapter Fifteen

Natalya and Skyfire, curious about what was taking so long, joined Hiccup and Toothless as they flew after Astrid.

Hiccup relayed what had happened as they searched for a good place to grab Astrid. Intentionally or not, she was doing an excellent job of staying in areas where it would be very hard for a dragon to fly down without hitting a tree. Trying not to think of what they might be faced with if Astrid refused to listen, Natalya pointed out a tiny clearing up ahead. It wouldn't take more than half a minute for Astrid to run across, but that was plenty of time for a Nightfury. "There!"

Hiccup and Toothless swooped down, catching Astrid as she vaulted a log and soaring back up to deposit the screaming Viking at the top of a very tall pine. Natalya and Skyfire hovered below, out of range for

Astrid to jump on them, but close enough to catch her if the blonde lost her grip. For now, though, Astrid was clinging for dear life. "Hiccup, get me down from here!"

Hiccup held out his arms in a placating gesture. "You have to give us a chance to explain!"

Astrid snarled, trying to get a leg up onto the branch. "I am not listening to anything you say! How did you even get dragons in the first place?"

Natalya glared up. "I thought you weren't going to listen to anything we said?"

Hiccup made a shushing gesture in her direction, addressing Astrid, "Then I won't speak. Let us show you."

Natalya sent him a clearly sceptical look as Astrid managed to hoist herself up on the branch. Hiccup returned one that suggested that they needed to start somewhere as Astrid knocked his hand away and climbed onto the saddle behind him. "Now get me down from here."

Hiccup placed a hand on Toothless, who was looking extremely grumpy at Astrid's attitude, and cast a wary look at Natalya, who had gone from looking annoyed to looking far too pleased about something. "Toothless, down. Gently."

Natalya and Skyfire sniggered in tandem as Toothless ignored both commands, rocketing up into the clouds, with Astrid screaming the entire way, clutching Hiccup as a lifeline. Skyfire followed at her rider's urging, not too close, but close enough to hear Hiccup as Toothless levelled out. "Toothless, stop! Bad dragon! He's not usually like this... oh, no."

It was quite unkind of Natalya to take any kind of pleasure in her cousin's discomfort, but it was hard not to relish the idea of Astrid getting a well-deserved dose of humility and finally being the one to feel out of place and at the mercy of others as Toothless plummeted toward the ocean in a dizzying streak of acrobatics, completely ignoring Hiccup's attempts to make him stop.

Natalya tried not to laugh as Astrid practically screamed an apology and Toothless abruptly levelled out into a slow glide through the clouds, the terrified expression on Astrid's face slowly transforming into a look of awe and wonder. She even let go of her death-grip on Hiccup, at least until Toothless glided into a slow loop.

The sunset had descended into night at that point, but the dragons and their riders remained above the cloud, just in case. Up there, lacking any storm clouds, the stars were bright and clear, and it was one of those perfect nights when the sky was illuminated in a dazzling display of colour from what Natalya's father said the Southerners called the 'Northern Lights'.

Eventually, the cloud cover ran out, and Berk came back into view, its rugged majesty clear from above, and the village and its watchtowers lit up in the darkness.

If there was a better introduction to the advantages of dragons, Natalya couldn't have planned it.

It was dangerous, getting this close, but on a Nightfury and a part-Changewing, they were unlikely to be spotted unless something very unexpected happened. Finally, Astrid broke her silence. "All right, I have to admit, this is pretty cool. It's amazing." She actually reached down to pat Toothless, "He's amazing."

The Nightfury looked almost smug at the proclamation, turning to drift into the approaching fog. Natalya could practically see her cousin's mind turning over the possibilities, realising that it had taken them less than half an hour to travel a distance that would have taken a longship several hours, even at full speed with both oars and a favourable wind.

Astrid's voice changed, gaining a slightly apprehensive note. "So, what now? Hiccup, your final exam is tomorrow! You're going to have to â€" " Astrid glanced at Toothless and lowered her voice. "- kill a dragon."

Hiccup scowled. "Yeah, don't remind me. What do you think I was doing with the basket of emergency supplies? I won't kill a dragon when there is still a chance for us to live together in peace."

"Yes, but how do you plan convince the other Vikings of that? We need more than our words and that of a bastard!"

Natalya sent her cousin a nasty look that Astrid didn't catch, but then tilted her head in sudden thought. "And maybe we have thatâ€" Hiccup, I'm going to make a detour and pick up some support. If I'm not back by tonight, then I'll see you at the docks in the morning."

She tried to turn Skyfire away, but the dragons suddenly went stiff, speeding up as he plunged lower into the mist. Natalya frowned at the unusual behaviour, trying again to turn her dragon, but Skyfire's wings were locked in a glide, and with rock pillars suddenly looming out of the mist, Natalya didn't want to risk a collision. Giving up for the moment, she crouched down in the saddle. Barely visible through the mist, she could see Hiccup and Astrid doing the same, Toothless also lost in some kind of trance.

The shadows that floated in the mist suddenly resolved themselves into dozens or even hundreds of dragons, all flying in un-naturally direct lines to a single destination. A Nightmare flew next to a Nadder, when the two species usually avoided each other like the plague. On top of that, Nightmares tended to be solitary, and the Nadder should have been flying in a flock with the other Nadders that the Viking teens could see scattered through the mist. None of the other dragons that Natalya could make out were behaving as expected, either. Changewings were actually visible, rather than a flicker here and there as they changed with their surroundings. Gronkles were flying in a straight line, rather than the hovering zig-zag that was their normal pattern.

That was rare, and more than a little worrying. What could be causing the dragons to behave so strangely? Hiccup sounded equally confused. "It looks like they're hauling in their kill."

Astrid was distinctly more nervous. "Um, what does that make us?"

Natalya rolled her eyes. "Not their kill, though I'm very interested in discovering what's so powerful that it can control multiple dragons. Hold on, there's something ahead."

The fog cleared enough to show a mountain, almost as big as Berk, lit up with red light, though whether that light was lava or something else remained up for question. Well, if everything went south with proving that dragons were peaceful, and if the Valley was no longer an option, this wouldn't be the worst alternative.

The dragons flew into a cave about half-way up, which turned out to be a tunnel that opened into a huge cavern, filled with nesting dragons and a mist that glowed red with the same light that had lit the mountain's heart. Toothless and Skyfire were looking distinctly nervous, as much as dragons could, and Natalya's forehead wrinkled in confusion as she watched the wild dragons drop their burdens into the red mist.

Some kind of storehouse, where they kept excess food, as humans did? Behind her, Hiccup managed to keep his voice low. "What my Dad wouldn't give to find this." His tone became slightly annoyed as the dragons found an empty ledge, hiding behind a large pillar. "Well, it's satisfying to know that all of our food is being dropped down a hole."

Astrid sounded confused. "They're not eating any of it. Why?"

Natalya frowned. "I think the bigger concern is what could make our dragons, especially a Nightfury act like this. Other than the eel, when was the last time you saw a dragon cower away from anything?"

That question was answered when a Gronkle buzzed to the hole and dropped in a fish.

A massive dragon head, at least as big as the Great Hall back on Berk, rose up out of the red mist, swallowing the unfortunate Gronkle in a single bite.

Terrified and in shock, Natalya clutched Skyfire around the neck, hiding her face behind the dragons frill. Hiccup's gasp and Astrid's fearful question mirrored perfectly how she felt. "What is that?"

Neither of the more experienced teens answered her, Toothless and Skyfire copying the other dragons in the mountain by either hiding behind a pillar or outcropping, or making themselves as small and unnoticeable as possible.

Hiccup and Natalya had speculated more than once that perhaps the dragons were being controlled by something, to act against their instincts, but this—this was beyond anything they had ever imagined.

Hiccup didn't need to be told the obvious, speaking softly to Toothless. "OK, bud, we need to get out of here, now!"

He was just in time, because the dragon, starting to sink back into the mist, suddenly stopped, sniffing the air. All three Vikings could tell the exact moment when it spotted them.

It roared again, loud and angry at the intrusion. All of the smaller dragons immediately took flight, spiralling out of the mountain at full speed. It turned out to be a blessing, as Skyfire and Toothless were less noticeable in the chaos, and with some of the wild dragons crashing into each other in their haste to escape, the Vikings made it out safely.

Shaking herself out of the sheer terror, Natalya took a deep breath. "Right, back-up for tomorrow. Meet at my Hall and we'll strategise."

Skyfire streaked away, swiftly becoming lost in the encroaching mist.

* * *

><p>The sun had just set when Natalya landed in the woods near the Murderous Meathead village, Camicaze riding behind her. The younger girl slid off Skyfire, stumbling only a little. "Right, I'll get Thuggory, and we'll meet you back here in a few minutes."<p>

Natalya agreed, smiling as Camicaze disappeared into the shadows. That was one reason she had gone to the Bog-Burglars first, even though the Meatheads were closer to Berk. Cami could get in and out of anywhere with ease, and an Heir showing up and asking for Thuggory's help would go a lot smoother than if Natalya tried to do it.

The other reason was that the Bog-Burglars were a matriarchal society, with no small number of illegitimate children among them. In their tribe, women were the warriors, and men the caretakers, which meant not enough men to go around because those who wanted to break out of gender roles had to do it in a different tribe. The fact that Natalya was Camicaze's friend, and that even those who loved the Heir best needed the occasional break from her, meant that picking Cami up took all of half a candle-mark.

Trying to get Thuggory alone to talk would have taken hours, but having Cami slip in and semi-kidnap him was easy. Thuggory had always preferred to let Hiccup and Cami take the lead in whatever was going on, anyway, and Natalya had promised Cami a full explanation when they returned.

A rustle caught her attention, along with the sound of lowered voices. "â€" will you just tell me what is going on? Whoa!"

That was fast. The two heirs appeared from the bushes, Thuggory's expression melting from annoyance to awe. "Dragons? And you're riding it?"

Natalya dismounted. "Her, actually, and yes. Look, we don't have much time. Hiccup and I need your help."

Thuggory nodded instantly. "Whatever you need. Er, if you could explain and come up with a cover story for my dad, though, that would

be great."

Natalya nodded. "Short version: Hiccup managed to win Dragon Training through a series of non-lethal tricks, we're working on a plan that could change everything about the dragon war, and we need you there for support. Tell your dad that it's a show of support and solidarity between future chieftains."

Thuggory nodded and dashed back to the village, returning in a matter of minutes, by which time Camicazi and Natalya had worked out an explanation for Berk. Skyfire took off, and Natalya glanced over her shoulder to see the expression of awe and determination that she had hoped for. It was the one she had seen on Hiccup's face the first time he flew; the longing for a dragon partner of their own.

When Thuggory finally eased off the death-grip he had around Natalya's waist, he started asking questions. "What do I tell the Hooligans when they ask why I'm here? Or how I got here when there are no new ships in the harbour?"

Natalya smirked, glad that neither of the Heirs could see her. "Roll your eyes and blame Cami. Everyone knows not to underestimate her skills, or the extent of the crazy ideas she gets."

Behind Thuggory, Camicazi laughed, and it was easy to picture the smug look on her face at what she perceived as praise. Natalya continued. "As for details, I'd prefer to wait until we meet Hiccup. I don't want to explain everything twice."

* * *

><p>As it happened, Hiccup was waiting for them when Natalya snuck the two Heirs through the village and into her hall, looking nervous and slightly put out. Natalya closed the windows as Skyfire made herself comfortable in the loft. "Is everything all right? Astrid didn't run off and tell anyone, did she?"<p>

Hiccup pulled a face at the mention of the blonde, but shook his head. "No, she punched me in the arm and kissed me."

Natalya's heart plummeted to her toes. Thuggory, entering behind Cami, looked confused. "Er, hasn't that been your dream for years now? You don't look as happy as I would have expected."

Hiccup brightened as he noticed the other heirs. "Thug, Cami! How did you get here?"

Cami laughed. "On dragon back, of course! Natalya had a plan that involves us, but she wouldn't tell us until we found you. Now, what's this about Astrid?"

Hiccup's face fell again, shooting a nervous glance at Natalya, whose face was suddenly harder to read than stars in the daytime. "To sum things up: I got a better look at who Astrid is, rather than what I'd dreamed her to be, while we were in Dragon Training. I think what I wanted was acceptance, rather than Astrid herself. Maybe I could see her as a friend, one day, but not as a partner. I'm also concerned at how quickly she went from wanting to kill me to kissing me."

Cami had been glancing between Hiccup and Natalya as he spoke, and

finally raised an eyebrow. "And, judging from the way you two are carefully not looking at each other, Astrid kissing you comes shortly after Natalya _finally_ made a move of her own."

Thuggory clapped Hiccup on the shoulder, nearly knocking him onto the table as Natalya blushed, but nodded. "I'm not upset with you, Hiccup, just a bit insecure and angry at my Cousin."

Hiccup looked very relieved at that. "Thanks. Your kiss was nicer, anyway."

Cami sniggered loudly, breaking the mood. "Anyway, what's the plan for tomorrow?"

Thuggory pulled out the chair next to Hiccup, "And the big secret that can change the war?"

Cami stared at him incredulously. "The fact that Natalya picked us up on a dragon doesn't give you a hint? This is why girls are better!"

Hiccup tried to head off a brawl in his possibly-girlfriend's kitchen. "That's part of it, and we discovered another part this afternoon."

He quickly ran through the events that led them to the Nest earlier that day. Thuggory stared, then shook his head. "First opportunity, you're teaching me to ride a dragon. From the sound of it, no Viking will stand a chance against the Queen on foot, but you two won't face her alone."

Hiccup grinned at the bigger Heir, clasping arms in agreement. "Natalya and I will take you with us for the morning hunt, tomorrow, if you like. The fight against the Nightmare won't happen until at least mid-day."

The reminder of the 'graduation' from Dragon Training quickly turned the atmosphere serious. Even Cami dropped her wicked grin for a moment. "Right. So, what's the plan for that?"

Hiccup looked at Natalya, who shrugged lightly. "It's not a great plan, but I'm open to suggestions. Hiccup tames the Nightmare, which becomes our lead-in to the whole 'we don't need to kill each other' and explaining about the Queen, and we hold the location of the island hostage until we come up with a plan that doesn't include wholesale slaughter."

Thuggory shrugged. "Sounds good to me. What role to Cami and I play in all this?"

Hiccup met his friend's eyes. "Your role is to stop anyone from interfering. No-one is going to be happy when I throw down my weapons and make friends with a dragon, but I need you and Cami to stop my Dad or anyone else from charging in. There is a big difference between a dragon seeing you as not-a-threat and seeing you as a friend, and having someone interrupt or attack during that transition could be disastrous."

"If not fatal," Natalya's contribution was blunt, but realistic. "Animals don't trust twice, and predators react violently when they

feel endangered."

The other two Heirs nodded seriously. Cami spoke for them both. "We will do our best."

Natalya and Hiccup smiled in relief, the older girl rising to look through her cupboards, pulling out some cold pies and half a loaf, along with a small amount of yak butter. "Right, dinner, because I haven't eaten since breakfast, and then you can sleep over with me or randomly show up at Hiccup's door."

Tomorrow would change everything.

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><p>AN: Sorry for the delay in updating. My laptop is very old, and kept randomly shutting down and losing sections of the document. Luckily, I now have a new one as an early Christmas present, and aside from working out how to use a different brand of computer, it is fantastic!_

In other news, I FINALLY GOT PUBLISHED! 'Cinderella Grows a Spine' and 'The Highwayman's Legacy' are now both available on Amazon dot com in Kindle or paperback format. Better yet, both currently have a sequel in the works! ('Snow White Learns Stranger Danger' and 'Eternity's Invitation')

I'm also working on the next chapter now, and I'll try to work on it while I'm overseas to see Dad for Christmas.

_Thanks, _

_Nat _

16. Chapter 16

Disclaimer: I do not own How To Train Your Dragon, or any of the associated characters. All credit and proceeds go to Cressida Cowell and Dreamworks.

Summary: See Previous Chapters.

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><p>Chapter 16

True to form, Camicazi made her presence on Berk known in the usual way: loudly and dramatically.

Completely disregarding subtlety (and presuming that the blonde hellfire even knew what it was), the two heirs burst into the Chief's

Hall over breakfast. "HICCUP! Did we get here in time?"

Stoick nearly fumbled his tankard at the surprise entrance, and looked to be biting back several impressive curses. Cami had that effect on most people. "And what are you two doing here, without your parents or tribesmen?"

Camicazi plonked herself down next to Hiccup, trying to filch his slice of bread, but missing when he pulled it away. "After the Dragon Training success, I thought we should congratulate our friend in person. About time people realised that size isn't always the most important thing."

With Camicazi's own diminutive stature, compensated for by sheer ferocity, this was a stance she had been arguing for a long time, though with rather more success than Hiccup had. Thuggory just shrugged. "Cami comes up with the insane ideas, Hiccup thinks of ways to pull them off without dying, and I'm the brawn. When Hiccup wrote about Dragon Training and a possible new way to fight the war, I was interested. Then Cami showed up, dragged me onto a boat, and brought us here."

Stoick looked interested. "So, has my son told you anything about what he plans to do in the final test?"

Both of the heirs shook their heads. "No, but knowing Hiccup it's be unconventional and to do with brains rather than muscles."

Hiccup broke in before Stoick could question his friends further. "I want it to be a surprise, Dad, even though you'll probably think I'm crazy when I show you. Come on, guys, I want to show you something I discovered."

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><p>Pairing Camicazi up with an adolescent Changewing was probably a disaster waiting to happen, but the Bog Burglar was clearly having the time of her life as she ambushed a wild boar, using the Changewing's bulk to conceal them both until they were ready to strike.<p>

Thuggory was having slightly less success on a Thunderdrum, but was a definite convert to the side of Team 'Dragons Are Awesome'.

Above them, Toothless and Skyfire spiralled around each other, their riders holding a slightly stilted conversation amid the airborne acrobatics. "I really wish we had been able to sneak one of our own Nightmares into the Dragon Ring. It would have - careful, Skyfire! - made things a lot less complicated."

Hiccup shrugged. "If we had a Whispering Death, it might have been possible - Toothless, don't chase the seagulls, they taste horrible - but it's too late now. Berk isn't known for its earthquakes, and someone would get suspicious."

Natalya nodded. "We wouldn't have enough time to pull it off, now, anyway. Oh, want to see a new trick I developed?"

Hiccup nodded, but was totally unprepared for Natalya to leap off Skyfire, who blew a small fireball to deliberately miss her rider,

the force of explosion propelling Natalya the needed distance to land behind Hiccup, wrapping her arms around him in a gentle hug and lightly brushing her lips over his cheek, as she had done the morning of the last day of Dragon Training.

Guiding Toothless into a glide, Hiccup twisted in the saddle, to stare at her. "You know that was dangerous, right?"

Natalya smiled. "We've been practising at smaller heights, and either you or Skyfire would have caught me if I'd missed."

Hiccup couldn't help smiling at her unwavering confidence, leaning forward a few inches to kiss her properly. "Why did it take me so long to see how amazing you are?"

Natalya shrugged, her smile widening. "The same reason that the rest of Berk never realised your talents. They weren't looking, or they were looking for something that you weren't."

A nearby cloud stopped being a cloud and turned into Camicazi's Changewing, practically smirking to match the expression of its Viking rider. "Well, I think we can say that you both finally woke up to the obvious. How long do we have until we need to be back for the Test?"

Natalya glanced at the sun and gestured to Skyfire. "Not long, we should start heading back as soon as possible."

Again she plummeted through the air, swept up by her dragon as they began to round up the others, herding them back to Dragon Valley.

For some reason that even she wasn't quite sure, they left Skyfire and Toothless on the village side of the gorge. Somehow, Natalya and Hiccup both had the feeling that the truth would come out today, one way or another.

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><p>They arrived back in the village just in time, as Stoick and Gobber had apparently been on the verge of sending out a search party to make sure that Hiccup didn't wander off and miss his 'big day', utterly clueless as to how close Hiccup had come to doing just that the previous evening.<p>

The presence of Thug and Cami clearly startled some people, mostly those who had ended up on the wrong side of their pranks in the past, but otherwise passed without comment.

The heirs took their places near the Chief's chair as Stoick stood to address the crowd. "Well, I can show my face in public again! If someone had told me that in just a few short weeks, Hiccup would go from beingâ€| well, Hiccupâ€| to placing first in Dragon Training, I would have tied him to a mast and shipped him off, for fear he'd gone mad!"

Waiting just outside the arena, flanked by Astrid and Natalya, Hiccup tried not to sigh. This was not the kind of proud he had hoped for. Natalya had no such restraints, and rolled her eyes. "Your father can inspire Vikings to battle easily, but he really sucks at personal

feelings."

Astrid delivered a stern look. "You shouldn't talk about the chief like that!"

Natalya returned the stern look with an exasperated one. "Since when have Vikings shied away from blunt, if hurtful, honesty?"

Hiccup nudged them both. "Shhh. He usually follows up with a compliment."

They fell silent about the same time as the crowd stopped laughing and Stoick continued. "But, here we are, and no-one is more surprised, or more proud, than I am. Today, my boy becomes a Viking. Today, he becomes ONE OF US!"

Hiccup gulped, hearing the cheers of acceptance that he had longed for his entire life, and knowing that he risked losing that acceptance forever. The grate opened, and Natalya placed a hand on his arm, tucking a sprig of dragon-nip under his helmet. "Don't pick up a weapon. Just open the door and get out of the way. Nightmares like to make an entrance, and it might let off some aggression."

Astrid added her well-meaning, if not as helpful, support. "Be careful with that dragon."

Hiccup nodded at both of them. "It's not the dragon I'm worried about, but I have to try to put an end to this. If something goes wrong, make sure they don't find Toothless."

Both girls nodded, Astrid speaking for both of them. "We will. Just try to make sure it doesn't go wrong."

Anything Hiccup might have said in reply was forestalled by Gobber's appearance. "It's time, Hiccup. Knock 'em dead."

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup placed his helmet on his head, praying for his mother's strength, and walked into the ring. He ignored the murmurs as he walked past the weapon rack and pulled the lever to release the Monstrous Nightmare.

It burst into the training ring, already blazing, climbing over the chains and bars that acted as the arena's roof to show off to the assembled Vikings. Hiccup waited until it finished displaying and actually noticed him, then started to slowly pace forward, hand extended, trying not to notice his father sitting above with Thuggory and Camicazi, looking confused and suspicious. "What is he doing?"

Curious at such a change from the usual tactic of charging at it with pointy objects, the Nightmare paused, tilting its head and allowing Hiccup closer. Praying to Loki and any other god that might listen, Hiccup crooned the soft noises that Nightmares used to soothe their hatchlings, that he and Natalya had perfected over the years.

The Nightmare put itself out, slowly moving forward, and Hiccup kept his voice low and steady, but loud enough for the deathly-silent Vikings to hear. "It's OK, really, I know you don't understand, but this is important."

Stoick stood up, the expression in his eyes one of concern, anger and - oddly - something that was almost recognition. "Stop the fight."

"NO!" Hiccup didn't know where the determined strength in his voice had come from, but he wasn't about to let this chance slip away. "I need you all to see this. They are not what we think they are. There is another way."

The Vikings looked between Hiccup, who had survived longer in contact with a Nightmare than anyone they had ever seen without being attacked, to the surprisingly UN-surprised Heirs, who were acting like this was somehow routine, to Hiccup's father.

Stoick grabbed a warhammer, intending to strike the cage to interrupt the fight. Thuggory grabbed his arm, pulling back with all his strength and halting the downward swing just long enough for Camicazi to grab the warhammer (and quietly remove any other heavy weapons within reach). "Listen, this is part of what Hiccup told us. Just give him a chance!"

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><p>AN: Hi, all, sorry this is so late. And for the cliffhanger._

There's a couple of ways the story can go (like the movie, Stoick trusts Hiccup enough to listen, or no-one listens and they run away), and while I have a plan for each, I'm stuck on which one I want to go with.

_In other news, I've been working on my novels, and a collaborative work about life with Asperger's Syndrome, due for release on February 25. _**_"All You Can Be: Stories about Asperger's, by Aspies and those who love them"_**_ will be available from Amazon in Kindle and Paperback form._

Anyway, Reviews are much appreciated, as always, and I've started on the next chapter, though I can't make any promised on when it will be finished. As mentioned above, I'm still struggling on where to go with this.

End
file.